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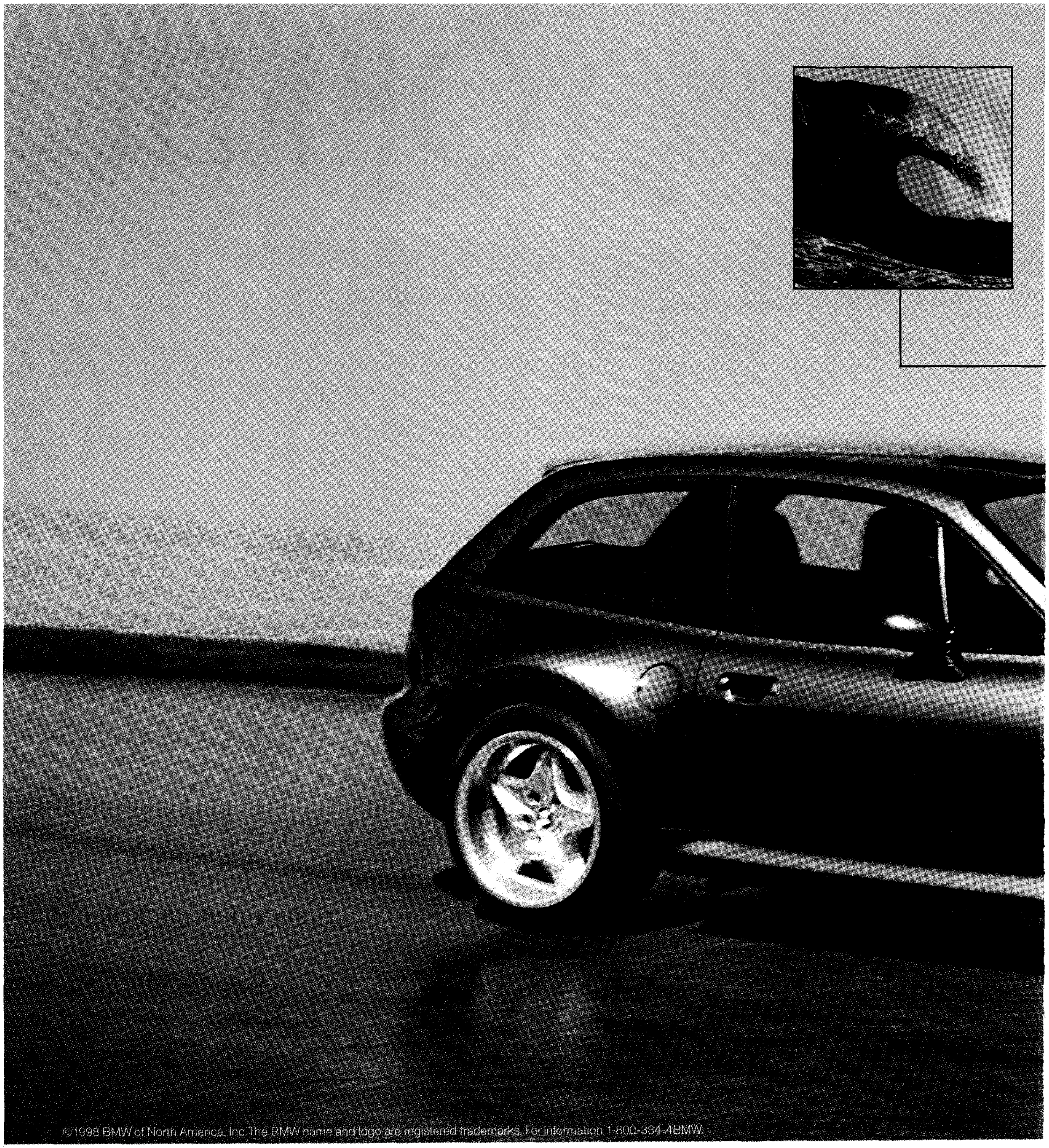

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THE NEW YORKER

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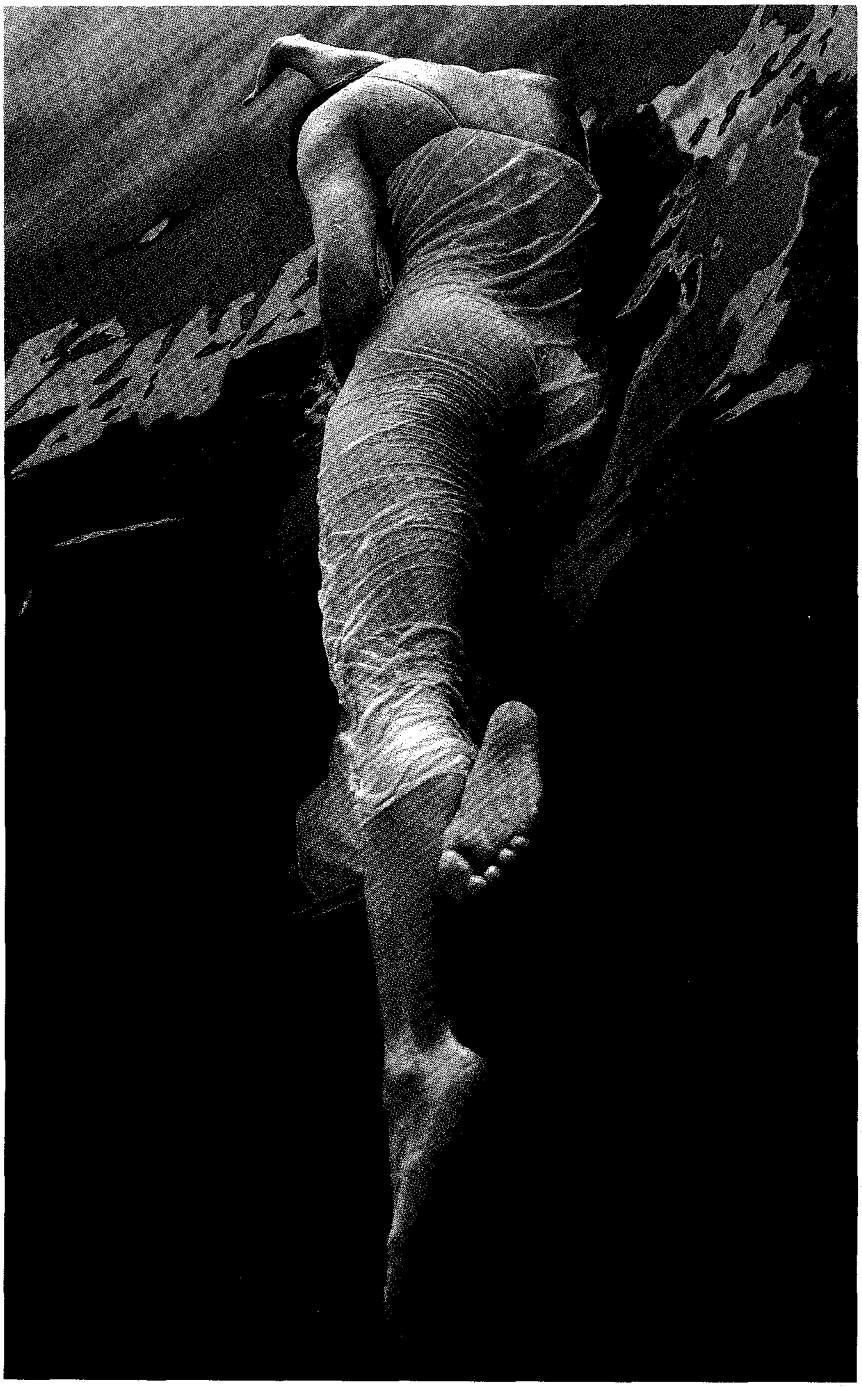

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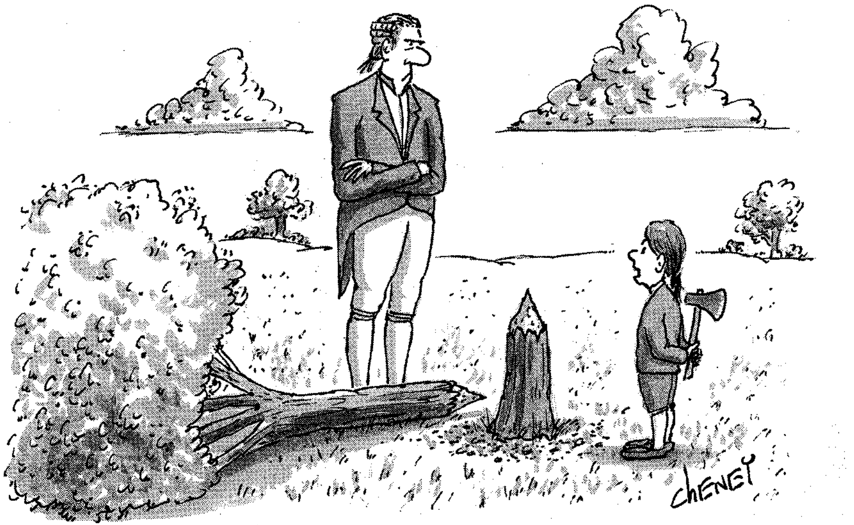

"It all depends on how you define 'chop.'"

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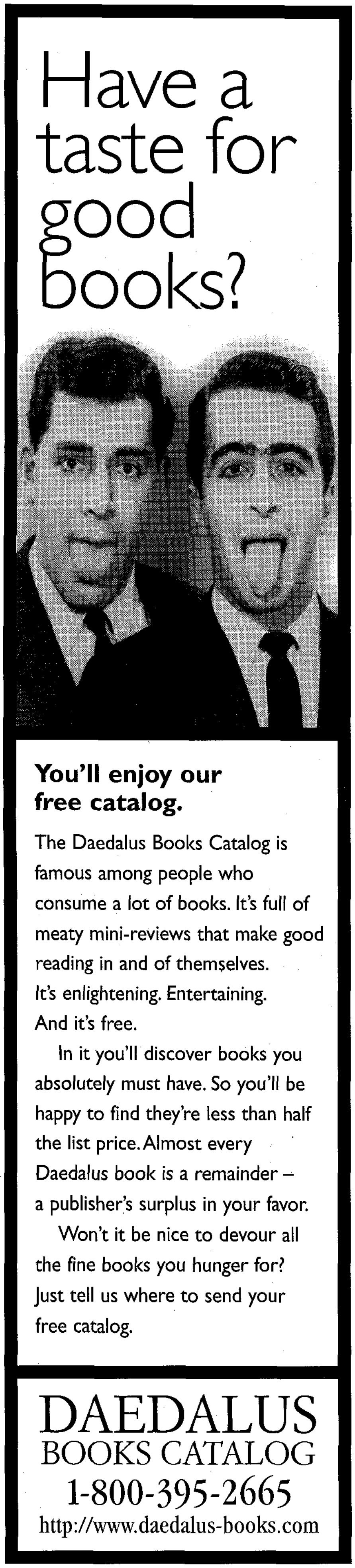
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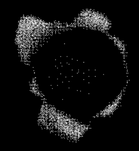

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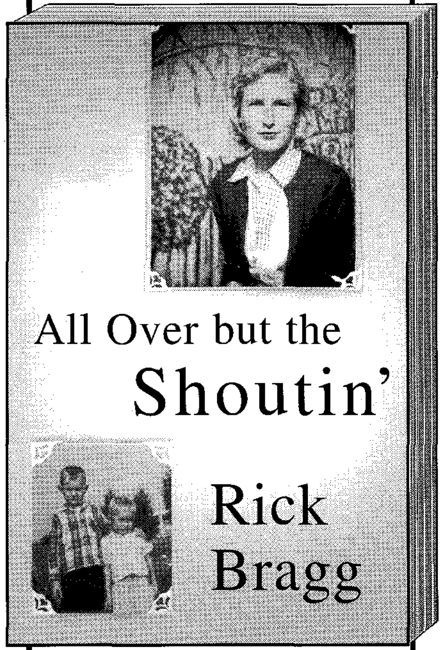

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THE MAIL

WASHINGTON FOLLIES

Regarding Joe Klein's "Primary Cad" (September 7th): Isn't it amazing that the only good guy in the Monica Lewinsky horror show is the American public? Abused, lied to, laughed at, played with, and doused with contempt by the media and the politicians, the American public still comes across as smart, alert, solid, fair, and understanding. Who'd have guessed?

BATYA DAGAN
Los Angeles, Calif.

Mr. Klein wonders why the American public is indifferent to the Lewinsky matter. The answer is that it adds nothing to our original view of Mr. Clinton. We've known since 1992 that, while his spirit can be magnificent, his flesh is famously weak. And who among us couldn't lie when cornered on this topic? Kenneth Starr's inquisition has reassured us that Lewinsky is neither innocent nor a victim, and that there's nothing more—for, if there were, the Texas Torquemada would have discovered it by now. Any apologies or scapegoating among the principals in the scandal is an inside-the-Beltway affair, of little interest to the country at large. What is interesting out here in Hollywood, where relationships are the lifeblood of our dominant industry, is why the Republicans are so hellbent on poisoning a well they hope to drink from one day themselves.

TIMOTHY J. F. SASSOON
Venice, Calif.

President Clinton's lack of remorse has shown what the hundreds of thousands of us serving time in America's prisons for consensual, victimless drug "crimes" have known for a long time: when both parties coöperate in socially prohibited activities, there is no real sense of wrongdoing on the part of either the supposed perpetrator or the alleged victim. Hence there is no remorse. We are not sorry that we sold socially unacceptable drugs to eager customers. The President is not sorry that he had socially unacceptable sex with an eager intern. Ms. Lewinsky is not sorry that she had socially unacceptable sex with an eager President. However, we are all sorry that we got caught.

WILLIAM E. HALL
Federal Correctional Institution
Seagoville, Texas

In "Terms of Impeachment," (September 14th), Jeffrey Toobin describes me as someone who "set his shirt on fire while attempting to light a cigar." The implication that I was unsuccessful in lighting my cigar while lighting my shirt is inaccurate. In fact, I not only succeeded in lighting both but was further able to quickly extinguish the latter while keeping the former burning. I do not know that I would've considered this matter worth reporting, but, if it is, surely it deserves to be reported fully.

BARNEY FRANK
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

SHAKESPEAREAN CHARACTER

John Barton renders us a great service by returning to the text of the most glorious writer in the history of English literature ("Speaking Shakespeare," by John Lahr, September 7th). However, in limiting his attention to the text he sadly, and wrongly, detracts from other aspects of Shakespeare's brilliance. Appreciation of Shakespeare's powerful, subtle language—language we still struggle to master—should not diminish appreciation of his wondrous and incisive insights into character. Barton dismisses that notion with his claim that the Elizabethans used the word "character" only to refer to a letter of the alphabet, but this is a pedant's ploy. Shakespeare successfully united language with his understanding of character development, and he did so in order to satisfy his audiences.

WARREN S. POLAND
Washington, D.C.

•

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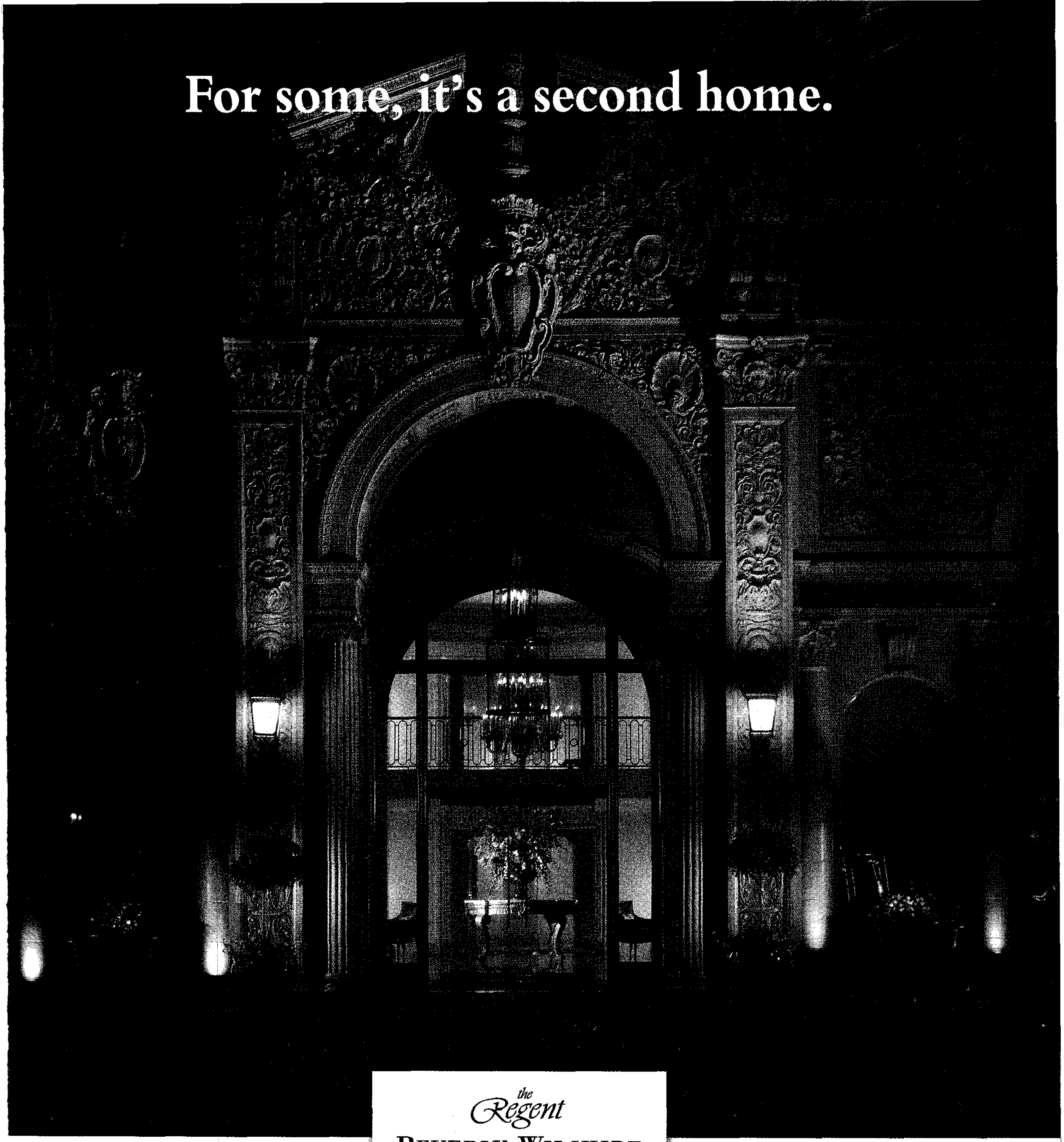

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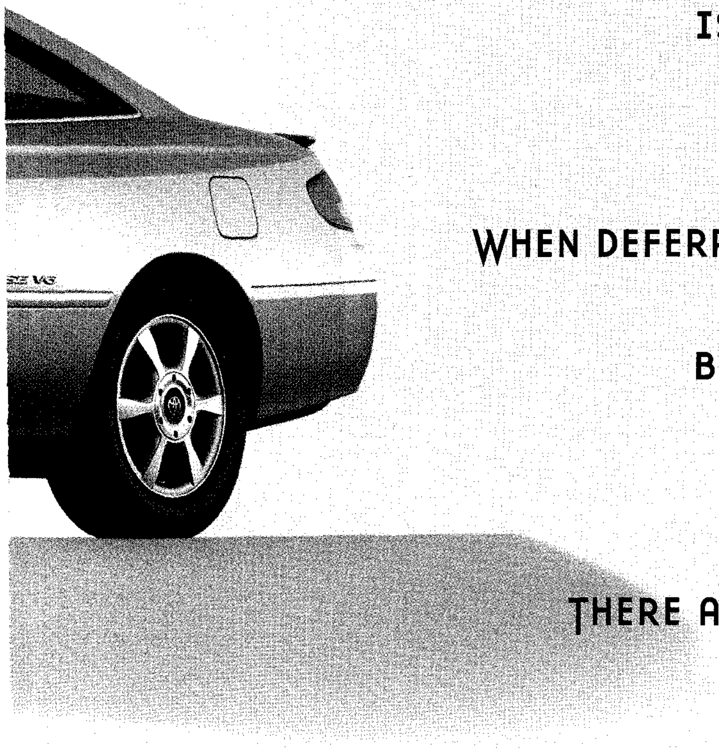

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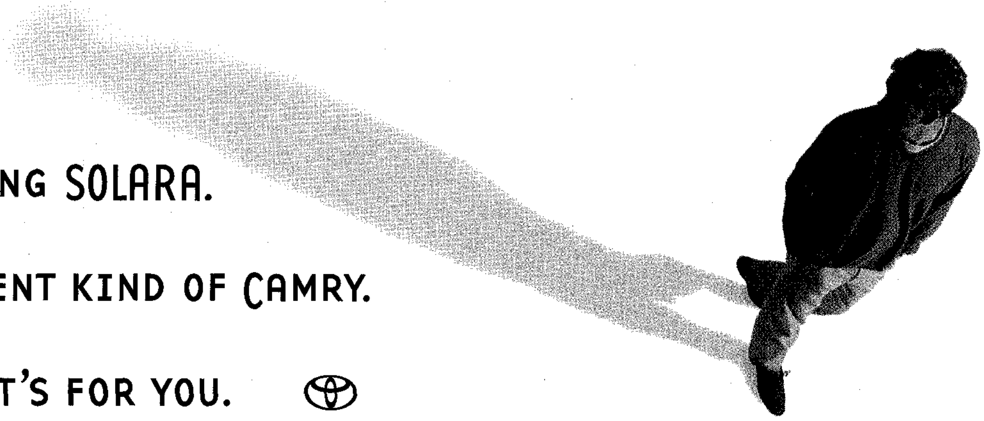

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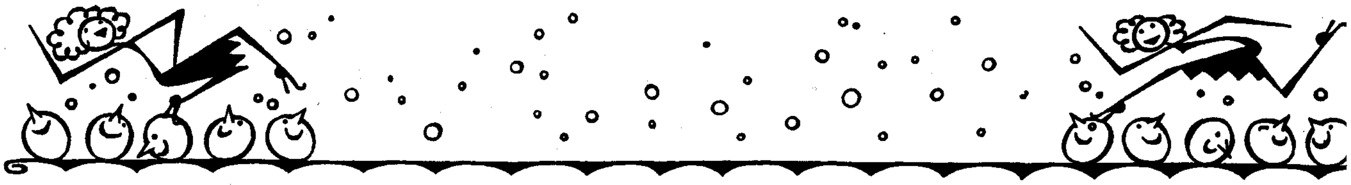

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

(Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.)

Corpus Christi—Terrence McNally's new drama tells the story of a young gay wayfarer on a spiritual journey with his twelve followers. Joe Mantello is the director. In previews. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

Duet! A Romantic Fable—A return engagement of the Adobe Theatre Company's staging of Gregory Jackson and Erin Quinn Purcell's comedy. In previews through Oct. 5. Opens Oct. 6 at 8. (Actors' Playhouse, 100 Seventh Ave. S. 239-6200.)

Footloose—A musical adaptation of the 1984 film about a small town where dancing has been banned, co-written by Dean Pitchford (who also wrote the screenplay) and Walter Bobbie. With music by Tom Snow and lyrics by Mr. Pitchford. Previews begin Oct. 2. (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.)

Getting and Spending—An idealistic investment banker charged with insider trading must convince a lawyer turned monk to defend her, in a play by Michael J. Chepiga. John Tillinger is the director. Previews begin Oct. 6. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

House/Lights—A work in progress from the Wooster Group, adapted from the Gertrude Stein opera "Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights." Performances begin Oct. 3 at 7:30 and continue through Oct. 25. (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 966-3651.)

Impossible Marriage—Holly Hunter leads the cast of Beth Henley's new drama, set in Savannah, about a young woman's marriage to a philandering older man. In previews. (Laura Pels, Broadway at 45th St. 719-1300.)

Killer Joe—Tracy Letts's black comedy, which is set in a Texas trailer park, stars Scott Glenn and Amanda Plummer. Previews begin Oct. 1. (Soho Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 239-6200.)

Little Me—Martin Short returns to Broadway to star with Faith Prince in a revival of the 1962 musical comedy by Neil Simon (book), Cy Coleman (music), and Carolyn Leigh (lyrics). Direction and choreography are by Rob Marshall. In previews. (Roundabout, Broadway at 45th St. 719-1300.)

More to Love: A Big Fat Comedy—Jack O'Brien is the director of a new play by Rob Bartlett (a writer and performer on the radio show "Imus in the Morning"), who stars as an overweight comic rethinking his life. Joyce Van Patten and Dana Reeve co-star. Previews begin Oct. 1. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

The Mystery of Irma Vep—A revival of Charles Ludlam's 1984 camp thriller, directed by and starring Everett Quinton (who appeared with Ludlam in the original Ridiculous Theatrical Company production). Stephen DeRosa is also in the cast. With sets by John Lee Beatty and costumes by William Ivey Long. Preview on Sept. 30. Opens Oct. 1 at 7. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.)

A Night in November—A one-man drama by Marie Jones, which is set on the night of the 1994 World Cup qualifying soccer match between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In previews. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

Oedipus—Billy Crudup and Frances McDormand lead the cast in Dare Clubb's retelling of the Greek myth. A Blue Light Theatre Company production. In previews. (CSC Theatre, 136 E. 13th St. 279-4200.)

Over the River and Through the Woods—In Joe DiPietro's new comedy, a young man planning his future clashes with his four Italian-American grandparents, who have ideas of their own on the subject. In previews through Oct. 4. Opens Oct. 5 at 7. (John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

Snapshots '98—An evening of one-acts from the Worth Street Theatre: "Imagining Brad," by Peter Hedges, and "The Cardinal Detoxes," by Tom Disch. In previews. (Tribeca Playhouse, 111 Reade St. 604-4195.)

Swan Lake—The British choreographer Matthew Bourne's he-swan interpretation of the Tchaikovsky ballet comes to Broadway. In previews. (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.)

'Til the Rapture Comes—A domestic drama set in a small West Virginia town, written by Edward Napier, a native of the state. In previews through Oct. 4. Opens Oct. 6 at 8. (WPA Theatre, 519 W. 23rd St. 206-0523.)

The Uneasy Chair—The owner of a boarding house (Dana Ivey) in Victorian London sues her ill-tempered boarder (Roger Rees), in a new comedy by Evan Smith. In previews through Oct. 3. Opens Oct. 4 at 7:30. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

OPENED RECENTLY

Candida—The Pearl Theatre Company begins the season with Shaw's 1903 play about marriage. Clare Davidson is the director. (80 St. Marks Pl. 598-9802. Closes Oct. 11.)

Caught in the Act—The Threshold Theatre's festival of international one-acts, by playwrights both well known (Arthur Schnitzler, Fernando Arrabal, Dario Fo) and obscure. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 647-0202. Closes Oct. 4.)

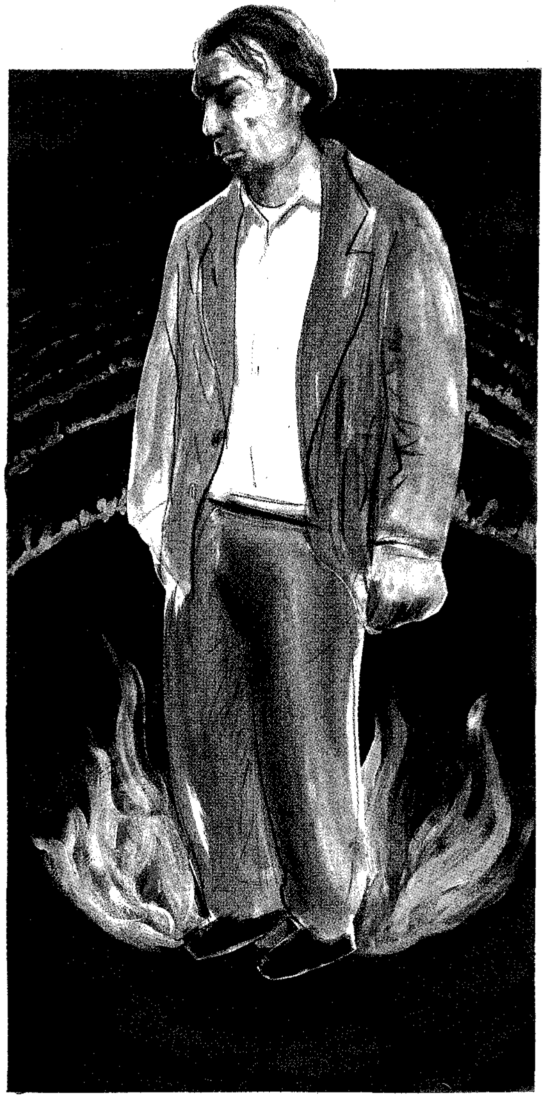
Collected Stories—In a splendid performance, Uta Hagen plays an aging writer who tells her protégée (Lorca Simons) the one story about her own life which she hasn't written. Complications, naturally, ensue. Unfortunately, other than providing a showcase for Ms. Hagen, this revival of Donald Margulies's 1997 drama only points out how poorly constructed the relationship between the two women is. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 239-6200.)

Communicating Doors—A wonderful farce with a fairy-tale ending, by Alan Ayckbourn. As with all good farce, the central conceit is serious and quite ridiculous at the same time; in this case, it involves murder and time travel. An exuberant cast, led by the wittily unflappable Patricia Hodges and including Mary-Louise Parker and David McCallum, makes the most of David Gallo's lovely set (which has six doors, good for slamming, hiding behind, and hitting miscreants with). Christopher Ashley's direction makes the precise framework of the plot clear without ever dampening the high spirits. (Variety Arts, Third Ave. at 13th St. 239-6200.)

Culture of Desire—Dante's "Inferno" and the life of Andy Warhol inspired the director Anne Bogart's play, her second installment in the Saratoga International Theatre Institute's two-part examination of American popular culture. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475. Closes Oct. 11.)

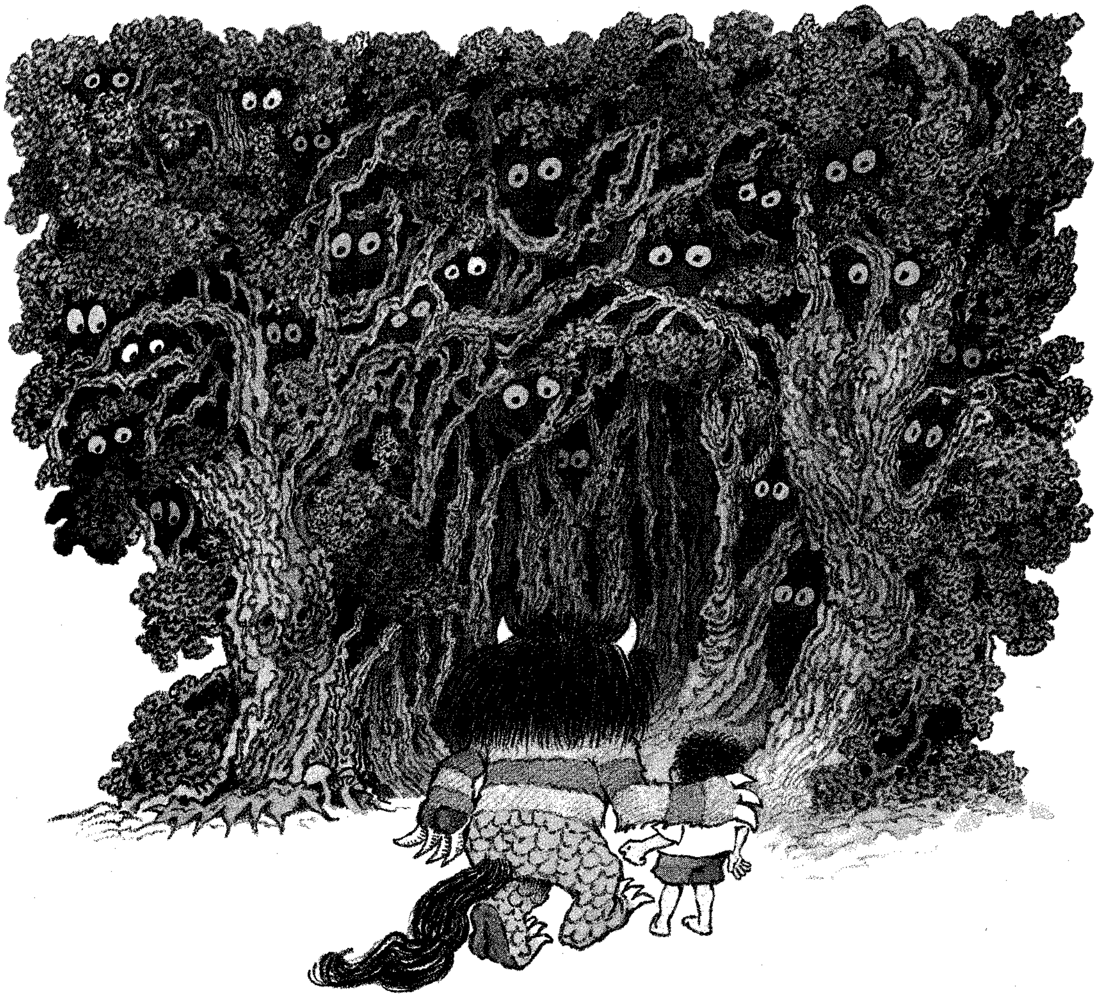
Dinah Was—Oliver Goldstick's play about the late blues singer Dinah Washington, starring Lillias White. (Gramercy Theatre, 127 E. 23rd St. 307-4100.)

A Dream of Wealth—Arthur Giron's drama about an American entrepreneur in Guatemala incorporates



Bill Camp, in Dante's "Inferno."

JOE DAVIS



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masks, music, and ritual movement. (46 Walker Street Theatre, 46 Walker St. 421-1380. Closes Oct. 11.)

The Dying Gaul—A five-week, encore staging of Craig Lucas's latest drama, in which a married Hollywood producer seduces a naïve young writer whose screenplay he wants to buy. (Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St. 353-3874.)

Hesh—From Naked Angels, a drama by Matthew Weiss that traces twenty years in the life of a troubled Bronx family. (INTAR, 420 W. 42nd St. 479-7304. Closes Oct. 10.)

Inferno—Robert Pinsky has adapted for the stage his own translation of the first part of Dante's epic poem. Directed by Robert Scanlan. Presented by the 92nd Street Y Unterberg Poetry Center. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 996-1100. Closes Oct. 4.)

The Irish . . . and How They Got That Way—This revue by Frank McCourt is a generally good-natured if somewhat choppy amalgam of historical tidbits, quotations from letters and speeches, and Irish songs from the past two centuries. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 727-2737.)

Marco Polo Sings a Solo—The Signature Theatre Company opens its John Guare season with the playwright's 1977 comedy, in which a filmmaker, working on an iceberg at the end of the millennium, takes on the life story of the Italian explorer. (555 W. 42nd St. 244-7529.)

Measure for Measure—David Herskovits, the artistic director of Target Margin Theatre, has the impressive ability to strip away years of interpretive assumptions about a play, exposing it as newly vigorous and thought-provoking, like a just restored Old Master. Though his productions are sometimes peculiar (and the work of his designers literal-minded and silly), Herskovits's direction at its best—as in this instance, applied to Shakespeare—allows the audience to see a script from a modern viewpoint without ripping it out of context. The actors are, for the most part, up to the challenge; Will Badgett (the Duke), Yuri Skujins (Escalus), and Tony Jackson (Elbow) are particularly good. (Connelly Theatre, 220 E. 4th St. 358-3657.)

Nijinsky Speaks—A one-man memory play, written and performed by Leonard Crofoot, in which the celebrated dancer looks back on his life from the confines of an insane asylum. (Harold Clurman, 412 W. 42nd St. 307-4100. Closes Oct. 18.)

Nunsense A-Men—An all-male version of Dan Goggin's 1985 musical comedy, "Nunsense." (47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

Power Plays—Three short plays, two written by Elaine May and one by Alan Arkin, who originally performed them with Jeannie Berlin and Anthony Arkin, their respective offspring. Richard Benjamin and Paula Prentiss have taken over for Alan Arkin and Ms. May. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 580-1313.)

Sakina's Restaurant—Aasif Mandvi portrays six characters in his one-man exploration of the South Asian community in New York. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

The Secret History of the Lower East Side—An interesting idea, with mixed results. The evening consists of historical vignettes—three half-hour one-person shows and three interstitial playlets—about the Lower East Side, set up as a guided tour and played out on the roof of Seward Park High School (which is a bit grimy and isolated but has gorgeous views of the city, making it perhaps the production's best metaphor for the neighborhood). At times the area's dizzying confluence of cultures is vividly evoked, but most of the writing just isn't good enough. The two exceptions are by Carlos Murillo and Peter Ullian, each of whom wrote one of the longer pieces; as performed by Rafael Baez, Murillo's work is the only sustained success. (350 Grand St., at Essex St. 279-4200. Closes Oct. 4.)

Stupid Kids—The WPA Theatre's production of John C. Russell's dark comedy of suburban-teen angst. Michael Mayer is the director. (Century Theatre, 111 E. 15th St. 239-6200.)

Symphonie Fantastique—Abstract puppets underwater, set to the music of Berlioz. This isn't rubber-duckie performance art; just as dance can make space a palpable presence onstage, the show's creator, Basil Twist, uses feathers, streamers, mirrors, bubbles, and sophisticated lighting to do the same for water. And, as in dance, the movement illuminates the music. A peerless, delightful evening. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 647-0202.)

Vegetable Love—The 29th Street Rep presents a surrealistic drama about an Irish-American family in the aftermath of the father's death, written by Tammy Ryan. (212 W. 29th St. 465-0575. Closes Oct. 11.)

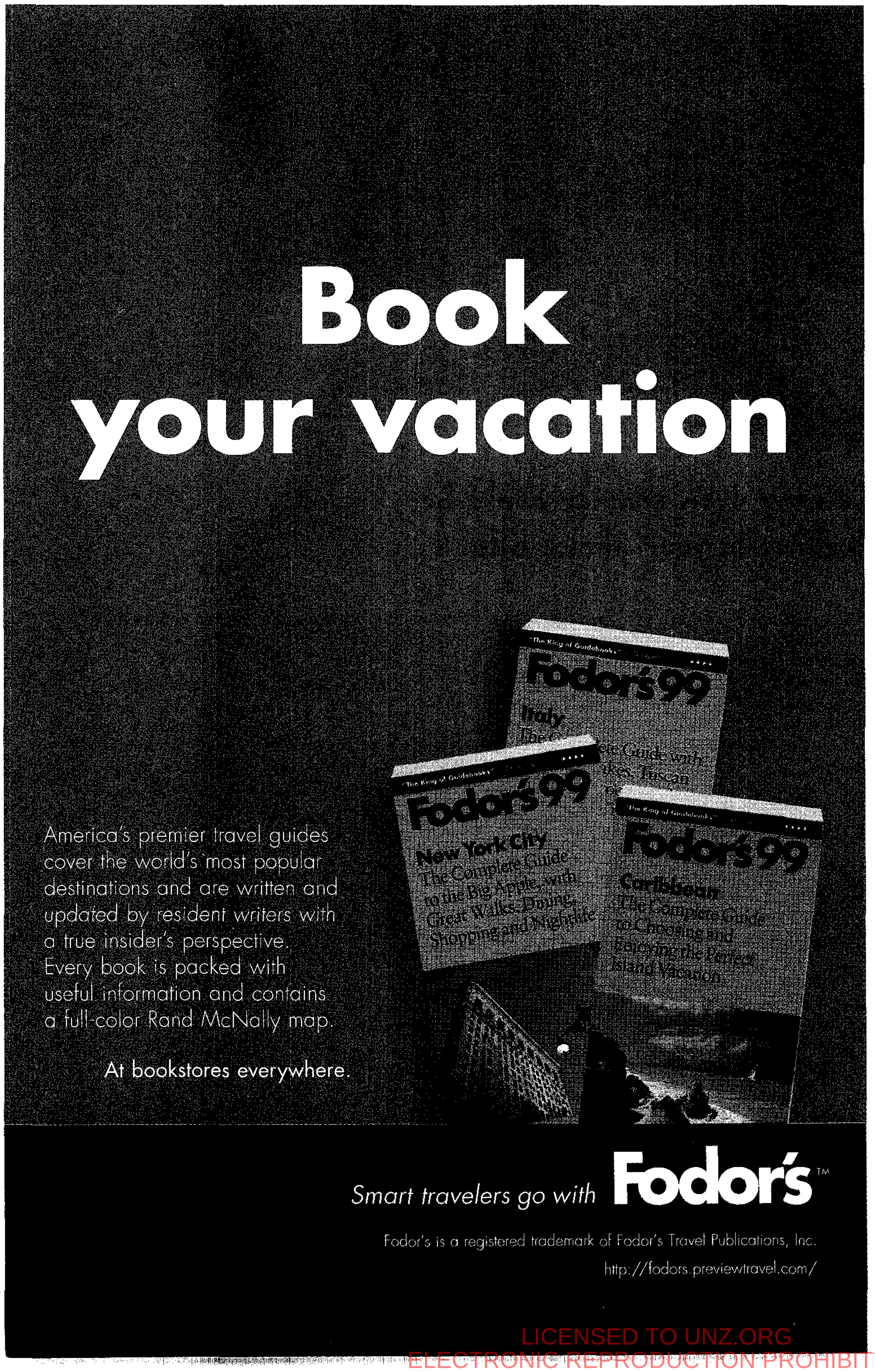
Villa Villa—Theatre as mosh pit. The Argentinean troupe De La Guarda herds you into a crowded space, performs undistinguished rock music, swings on ropes over your head, and splashes you until you're drenched. (Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E., at 15th St. 239-6200.)

The Weatherbox—Rattlestick Productions' season opener is a family drama by Travis Baker. (Theatre Off Park, 224 Waverly Pl., at 11th St. 675-5634. Closes Oct. 11.)

Wit—MCC Theatre presents the Long Wharf Theatre's staging of a dark comedy by Margaret Edson, in which a woman with cancer (Kathleen Chalfant) finds solace in the sonnets of John Donne. (120 W. 28th St. 727-7765. Closes Oct. 4.)

You Shouldn't Have Told—A drama about an urban, middle-class black family shaken by sexual abuse, written by Anne L. Thompson-Scretching. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

Zingaro—The French equestrian troupe returns to New York with "Eclipse," a new show featuring twenty-six horses, eighteen performers, and a Korean folk-music ensemble. (Big Top at Battery Park City. 718-636-4100.)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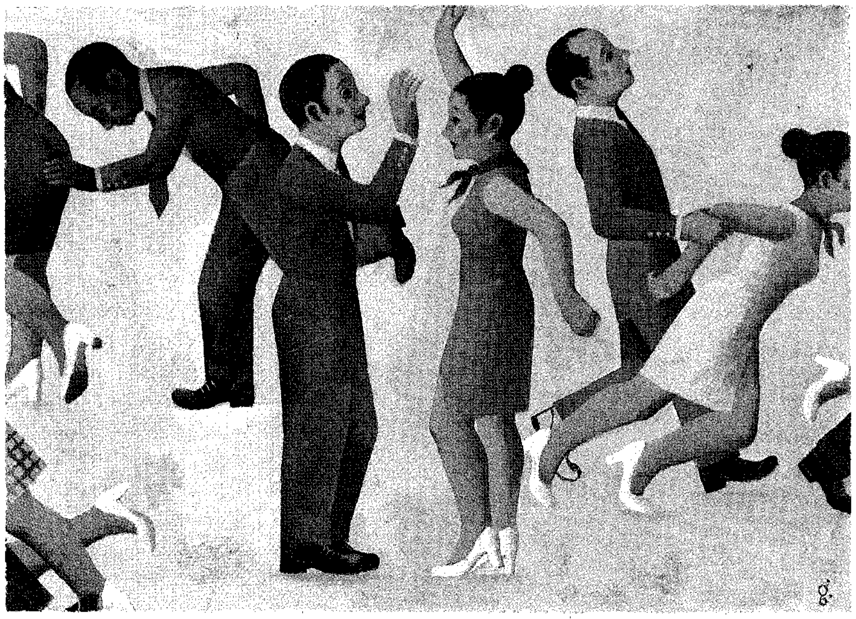
LONG RUNS

ART: Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4100. . . . **THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200. . . . **BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES:** Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370. . . . **BRING IN DA NOISE, BRING IN DA FUNK:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 239-6200. . . . **CABARET:** Kit Kat Klub, 124 W. 43rd St. 719-1300. . . . **CATS:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 239-6200. . . . **CHICAGO:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **THE FANTASTICKS:** Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., at Bleecker St. 674-3838. . . . **FORBIDDEN BROADWAY STRIKES BACK!:** Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200. . . . **HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH:** Jane Street Theatre, Hotel Riverview Ballroom, 113 Jane St. 239-6200. . . . **I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200. . . . **JEKYLL & HYDE:** Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **LATE-NITE CATECHISM:** St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200. . . . **THE LION KING:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100. . . . **LES MISÉRABLES:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **MISS SAIGON:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 239-6200. . . . **PERFECT CRIME:** Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401. . . . **THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA:** Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **RAGTIME:** Ford Center for the Performing Arts, 213 W. 42nd St. 307-4100. . . . **R & J:** John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 354-2220. . . . **RENT:** Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000. . . . **THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL:** Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100. . . . **SECRETS EVERY SMART TRAVELER SHOULD KNOW:** Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 799-4599. . . . **SMOKEY JOE'S CAFÉ:** Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200. . . . **THE SOUND OF MUSIC:** Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **STOMP:** Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at St. Marks Pl. 477-2477. . . . **TITANIC:** Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 307-4100. . . . **TONY N' TINA'S WEDDING:** St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200. . . . **VISITING MR. GREEN:** Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 505-0700. (Closes Oct. 4.)



Compagnie Maguy Marin in "RAMDAM," at the Joyce Theatre.

GERARD DUBOIS

DANCE

COMPAGNIE MAGUY MARIN—The witty choreographer Maguy Marin uses a light touch for social satire in "RAMDAM," a two-part full-length work. "RAM" parodies the conventions of the workplace, and "DAM" takes on journalese, bureaucratese, and other dialects of officialdom. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. Sept. 29-Oct. 2 and Oct. 6 at 8, Oct. 3 at 2 and 8, and Oct. 4 at 2 and 7:30. Through Oct. 11.)

RIVERDANCE—The fifty-one-member Irish step-dancing company stops by the home of the Rockettes for some high kicking of its own. (Radio City Music Hall, Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 247-4777. Sept. 30-Oct. 2 and Oct. 6 at 8 and Oct. 3-4 at 2 and 8. Through Oct. 11.)

"RELATIVITY"—Chris Aiken and Kirstie Simson, two dancers skilled in the jazzlike choreographic structures of contact improvisation, collaborate with two improvisational musicians, Philip Hamilton and Peter Jones, both veterans of the dance-jam performance format. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. Oct. 1-3 at 8 and Oct. 4 at 3.)

SARA PEARSON/PATRIK WIDRIG AND COMPANY—The six-member company appears in three works: "Alpsegen (God Bless and Protect This Mountain)," which contrasts the Swiss neutrality with recent revelations of treachery; "Be Careful What You Wish For," Pearson's chatty solo about desire; and "Terra Firma," a full-company work around a tableau of haystacks, set to the music of Tricky, Ethel Waters, and the Inkspots. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. Oct. 1-4 at 8:30.)

THE WHIRLING DERVISHES OF TURKEY—The twenty-five members of the Mevlevi Whirling Dervishes of Konya practice the ecstatic style of dance of the Sufi order founded by the mystic poet Rumi in the thirteenth century. The white-skirted company performs to the accompaniment of music and Koran recitation. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 545-7536. Oct. 2-3 at 8 and Oct. 4. at 7.)

"DANCES OLD AND NEW"—Mary Anthony Dance Theatre presents two works by the company founder—the revival of "Gloria," from 1967, and "The Magdalen," from 1998—along with a piece by Muriel Cohen and three premières by Kun-Yang Lin. (Merce Cunningham Studio, 55 Bethune St. 674-8191. Oct. 1-2 at 9 and Oct. 3 at 8.)

"YOUNG CHOREOGRAPHERS DEFINING DANCE FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM"—Seven works from as many African-American choreographers, including "Black Pearls," by Earl Mosley; "Dionne's Suite," by Matthew Rushing; and "Silver Is Precious, Silence Is Gold," by Nathaniel Trice. (Davis Hall, City College, Convent Ave. at 134th St. 650-7148. Oct. 2-3 at 8.)

PILAR RIOJA—The contessa of Spanish dance closes her twenty-sixth season with a program rich in works inspired by Federico Garcia Lorca to celebrate the centennial of his birth. (Repertorio Español, Gramercy Arts Theatre, 138 E. 27th St. 889-2850. Oct. 3 at 3 and 8 and Oct. 4 at 3.)

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NIGHT LIFE

CONCERTS

"UKULELE MASTERS"—A rare East Coast performance by Hawaiian virtuoso Byron Yasui, who will be joined by studio bassist turned ukulele player Lyle Ritz, and Hawaiian native Led Kaapana, who will be accompanied by Bob Brozman (a veteran of cartoonist R. Crumb's band the Cheap Suit Serenaders) on the slide guitar. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400. Oct. 1 at 8.)

LYNYRD SKYNYRD—The surviving members of the band that wrote "Freebird," "Sweet Home Alabama," and other Southern-rock classics give the people what they want. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. Oct. 1-2 at 8.)

ROD STEWART—He fills his shows with high-stepping selections from his gilded catalogue. On good nights, the voice is as tanned as a weathered football; on bad nights, the hair redeems what the larynx cannot cover. And he ends the evening by kicking soccer balls into the audience. (Madison Square Garden. 307-7171. Oct. 2-3 at 8.)

"THE HIGH ROAD TO FREEDOM"—Actor Theodore Bikel narrates a multimedia presentation about the First Amendment, with performances by singer-songwriter Oscar Brand, vocalist Judy Collins, and singer Jack Landron. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. Oct. 3 at 8.)

KLEZMER TRIBUTE TO SIDNEY BECHET—We may never figure out how Bechet fit that lion into his soprano sax, but the ensuing roar has inspired a multitude of players since his ascendance to jazz royalty in the nineteen-twenties. Bechet was also a magisterial clarinettist; celebrating this aspect of his greatness is David Krakauer, himself a full-throated clarinet virtuoso as comfortable with klezmer as he is with classical music and jazz. (Symphony Space. Oct. 4 at 3.)

HOWARD ALDEN AND JOE COHN—Two guitarists who navigate the crosscurrents of swing and bop with ebullience and not a trace of anxiety, Alden and Cohn are poised players who find the youthful spirit in tunes that might show their age in other players' hands. (Church of the Heavenly Rest, Fifth Ave. at 90th St. 752-1428. Oct. 4 at 5.)

JANET JACKSON—Her last record, "The Velvet Rope," was considered something of a commercial disappointment, but Ms. Jackson needn't worry. Unlike her unfortunate older brother, Janet has simply outgrown her public's expectations. Live, she's just a great entertainer—her concerts are the choreographic equivalent of a May Day parade. With the suave R. & B. singer Usher. (Continental Airlines Arena, the Meadowlands. 212-307-7171. Oct. 6 at 8.)

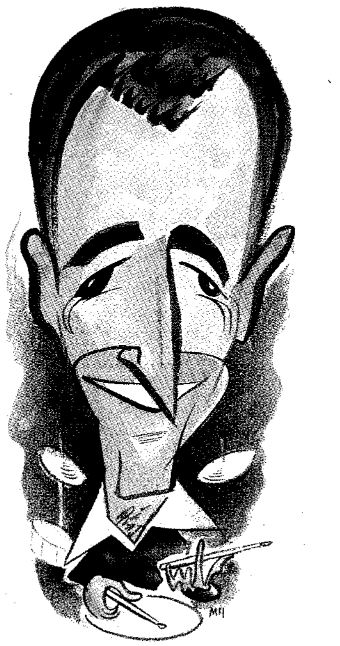
JAZZ AND STANDARDS

(A highly arbitrary listing, in which boldface type indicates some of the more notable performers in town. Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.)

ALGONQUIN HOTEL, 59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—**MARY CLEERE HARAN,** a great performer who mixes barbed comic observation with genuine scholarly enthusiasm, is here through Oct. 10, paying tribute to George Gershwin. Dining.

BIRDLAND, 315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—Twenty years after he burst upon the scene as Ornette Coleman's guitar-playing alter ego, **JAMES (BLOOD) ULMER** (Oct. 2-3) is still one of a kind. Blending gnarled blues with free jazz and funk rock, using tunings lost to the ages, and singing with the molasses drawl of a Delta crooner, Ulmer plays strictly by his own rules and extracts a noisy brilliance from it all. What makes this gig extra special is the relatively orthodox rhythm section that Ulmer shares the stage with: pianist **JOHN HICKS,** bassist **REGGIE WORKMAN,** and drummer **RASHID ALI.** Simply put, anything can happen.

BLUE NOTE, 131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Through Oct. 4: The Argentinean tenor saxophonist **GATO BARBIERI** has a sensuous tone and a résumé that includes everything from avant-garde work in the sixties to composing the score for "Last Tango in Paris." Dining.



BOBBY PREVITE: *You can get a satisfying picture of what serious downtown music was, is, and might become by attending this dazzling drummer's twenty-year retrospective at the Knitting Factory (Sept. 30-Oct. 2). Previte will present nine of the eclectic ensembles he's piloted over the past two decades, among them Pushing the Envelope, Latin for Travelers, Empty Suits, the Horse, and Weather Clear, Track Fast—aggregations that traffic in new jazz, rock, fusion, world music, free improvisation, and all points in between. Among the downtown superstars joining him are John Zorn, Dave Douglas, Marty Ehrlich, Ray Anderson, Wayne Horvitz, and Jane Ira Bloom, but any band with Previte already has a built-in focus—his technique, tone, and rhythmic creativity can be mesmerizing. (74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. 219-3055.)*

CARLYLE HOTEL, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—Singer **BARBARA COOK,** who still sets the standard in combining musicality with intensity, lets loose through Oct. 10. Monday nights belong to **WOODY ALLEN AND THE EDDY DAVIS NEW ORLEANS JAZZ BAND. . . .** ¶ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, **PETER MINTUN** presides at the piano through Oct. 10.

IRIDIUM, 44 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Sept. 30: The **TOM HARRELL BIG BAND.** Oct. 1-4: **TOM HARRELL BRAZIL.** Pushing himself beyond the status of musician's musician, Harrell doesn't

MARCELLUS HALL

want for skill or ambition. The trumpet and flugelhorn player best known for his impressive work with Phil Woods, Joe Lovano, Charlie Haden, and others, is also a top-notch arranger and fine composer. On his own recordings, Harrell has shown great ingenuity transforming medium-sized horn sections into full-sized-sounding ensembles; a big band was the logical next step. The Brazil unit is a less certain proposition. While Harrell is enamored of Latin rhythms and formal ploys, his use of them often feels forced. If he hasn't yet worked out the kinks, he's got enough genuine Latin-jazz musicians onstage to pull him through. Mondays belong to electric-guitar innovator **LES PAUL.**

Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—**ANTHONY WILSON** (Oct. 1-3), the impressive young West Coast guitarist and composer/arranger (and son of legendary arranger Gerald Wilson), thankfully understands that hot-shot licks are nothing if not framed by robust composition and crafty orchestration. Oct. 5: Like their brethren the Lounge Lizards, the **JAZZ PASSENGERS** (here on the first and second Mondays of each month) are now a band that uses jokes rather than a joke band. A healthy sense of humor never precluded incisive improvising (Dexter Gordon, anyone?) or smart writing (is there a Mingus among us?), and the Passengers keep maturing on both scores.

Knickerbocker, 33 University Pl., at 9th St. (228-8490)—Brass rails, vintage posters, Hirschfeld drawings, and a piano. Sept. 30-Oct. 3: Pianist **RUSS KASSOFF** and bassist **LINC MILLIMAN.**

Rainbow & Stars, 30 Rockefeller Plaza (632-5000)—The great cabaret in the sky. Vocalist **CYBILL SHEPHERD** finishes a two-week stay on Oct. 3. . . . ¶ Across the hall, in the Rainbow Room, there's a revolving dance floor, plus swinging big-band music courtesy of the Rainbow Room Orchestra, featuring vocalists Sean Mahony and Hilary Kole. Closed Mondays.

Sweet Basil, 88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (242-1785)—Through Oct. 4: The **KENNY GARRETT** quartet. While the tenor still rules as the jazz saxophone of choice, the alto is currently finding more than its usual share of champions, chief among them Garrett. Despite a strong decade-plus résumé, including work with Art Blakey, Miles Davis, and Woody Shaw, Garrett has started to blossom as a distinctive player only in the past few years. His neo-modal bop approach may not be radically different from the other alto contenders', but his technical fluency and expressive power are. Skirting well-worn clichés as if they were thorny thickets, Garrett bends pungent, airborne phrases until they take on a life apart from his horn. He may not change the face of jazz, but he's certainly restoring some needed passion. Dining.

Tonic, 107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—Oct. 1-3: **JOHN ZORN'S BAR KOKHBA.** Zorn's marvellous chamber group has a few things in common with two of his other projects, Masada and the Masada String Trio. Members from each group can be found in the others, and all three share the same repertoire, the library of Jewish Eastern European-tinged music that Zorn has composed over the past decade. Performing these often beautiful, astringently lyrical melodies are violinist Mark Feldman, bassist Greg Cohen, cellist Eric Friedlander, guitarist Marc Ribot, drummer Joey Baron, and percussionist Cyro Baptista.

Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Why does guitarist **RUSSELL MALONE** (here through Oct. 4) make other fretmen fret? Ample technique aside, it could be his sweeping grasp of jazz styles which allows him to blend as easily with swing masters like Bucky Pizzarelli—and neo-swingers like Malone's regular employer, Diana Krall—as with fervent boppers including Roy Hargrove. A classy rhythm section, made up of pianist **KENNY BARRON,** bassist **RON CARTER,** and drummer **LEWIS NASH,** joins this rising star. The **VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA** holds sway on Mondays.

ROCK, ETC.

Bottom Line, 15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—Oct. 3: An evening of country pop with **HAL KETCHUM** and **ALLISON MOORER.**

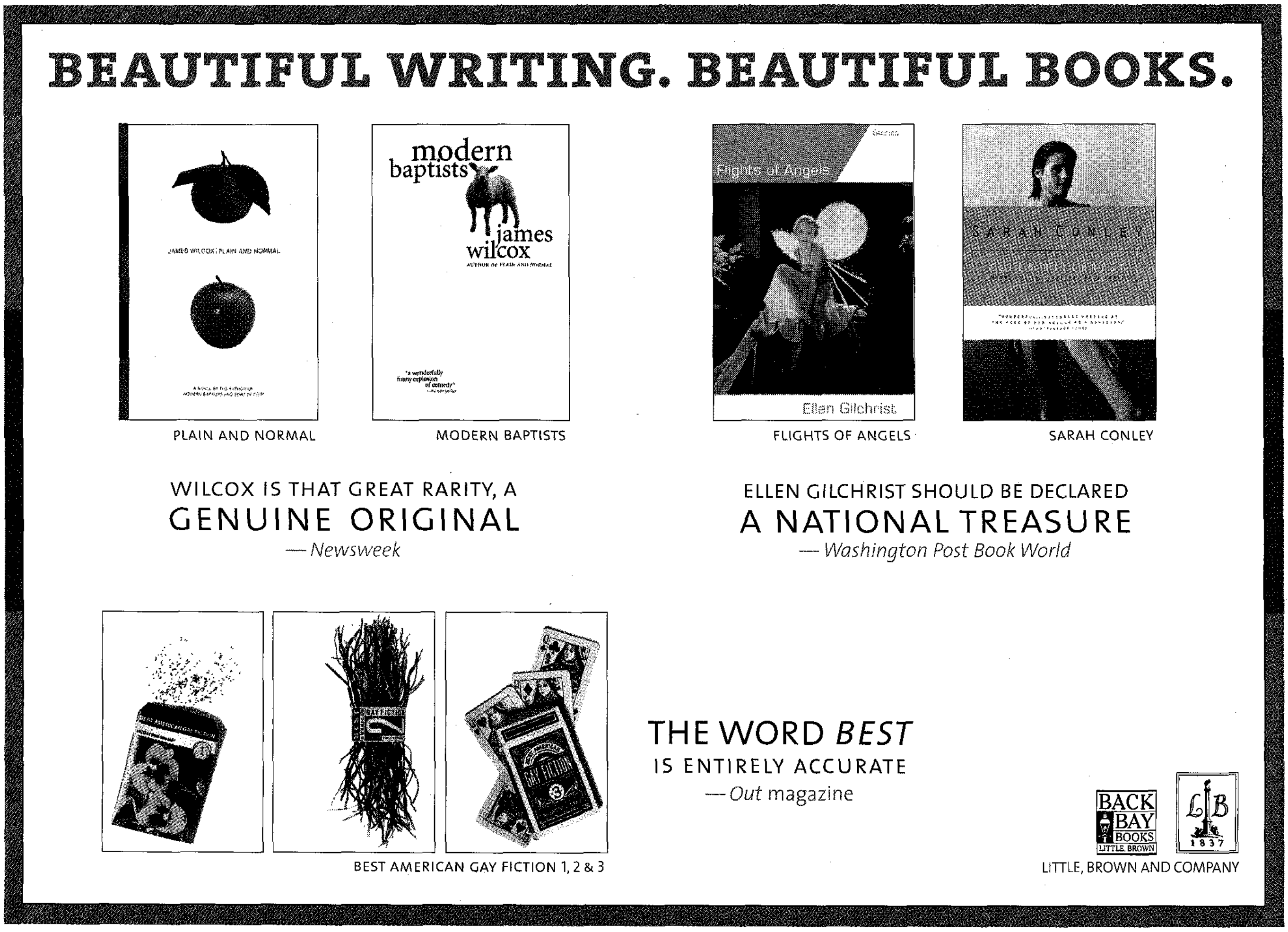
Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—Sept. 30: The wraithlike pop of **LOW.** Oct. 1: The alt-country outfit **SON VOLT** unplugs for an acoustic evening. With singer-songwriter **JOSH ROUSE.** Oct. 3: **THE JON SPENSER BLUES EXPLOSION,** the band that tries to reimagine Elvis Presley as a post-ironic punk with a degree from Dartmouth.

Coney Island High, 15 St. Marks Pl. (674-7959)—Oct. 2: **GOD LIVES UNDERWATER,** a Los Angeles duo that records its electronica-infused music in a bedroom studio.

The Cooler, 416 W. 14th St. (229-0785)—A lavender and stainless-steel dungeon deep in the heart of the meat-packing district. Sept. 30: New York art rock with **BARBEZ.**

Fez, 380 Lafayette St. (533-7000)—A comfortable neo-Moroccan bar hidden inside the Time Café. The **MINGUS BIG BAND** still packs them in every Thursday. Dining.

Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Sept. 30: Former Brand New Heavies vocalist **N'DEA DAVENPORT.** Oct. 1-2: **MORCHEEBA.** On the aptly named "Big Calm," this London-based trio has quietly made what may be the most appealing record of the year. Led by vocalist Skye Edwards, who hovers more than sings, Morcheeba makes a stylish wash of low-riding strings and trip-hop grooves—music that's equally at home in a smoky club or on your bedroom stereo. Edwards has been accused of being emotionally distant, but her voice is so cool it's narcotic. Live, it ought to be illegal. Oct. 5: *Paper* magazine columnist and hip-hop colorist **DJ SPOOKY.** . . . ¶ The Swing Dance Soci-



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—*Washington Post Book World*

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Life, 158 Bleecker St. (420-1999)—Oct. 2: The shoe-gazing, feedback-drenched sound of the **JESUS AND MARY CHAIN.**

Manny's Car Wash, 1558 Third Ave., at 87th St. (369-2583)—Oct. 2: **MIKE WELCH,** the guitar monster who's still in his teens. Oct. 3: **LITTLE MIKE AND THE TORNADOES.**

Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-798-0406)—Oct. 1: The underground country of **ROBBIE FULKS.** Oct. 3: Modern rock one-hit wonders **NADA SURF** ("Popular") meet former Television guitarist **RICHARD LLOYD.**

Morcheeba, at Irving Plaza.

Mercury Lounge, 217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—Oct. 1: Post-folk singer **PATTI ROTHBERG.** Oct. 2-3: **SINÉAD LOHAN.** There's no reason to have heard of this singer-songwriter from Cork, though she was on the bill of Lilith Fair and she's got Joan Baez's manager. But her début album was a huge success at home, and the sound of her first United States release, "No Mermaid," is reason enough to drop by and hear her.

S.O.B.'s, 204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—Sept. 30: Moroccan sintir player **HASSAN HAKMOUN** headlines an evening of global pop, with Spanish flamenco guitarist **GERARDO NÚNEZ** and Japanese banjoist **AKIRA SATAKE.** Dining.

Tramps, 51 W. 21st St. (727-7788)—Sept. 30: **FRANK BLACK.** The man who once ran the Pixies has been a solo act for some time now, and with every passing year he grows increasingly irrelevant. He's the John Waters of alternative rock: a maker of uneven entertainment shot through with the mystique of former greatness. Oct. 2: **ARCHERS OF LOAF.** Oct. 3-4: **ELLIOTT SMITH.** First came the surprise Oscar nomination and telecast performance. Now the last great hope of indie rock has just made his major-label début, on DreamWorks. Could this really be the end of getting to see him up close?

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—It's hard not to sound a bit breathless about "From Van Eyck to Bruegel," surely the most gorgeous exhibition of the fall season. It's drawn entirely from the Met's own collection of early Netherlandish painting, which is one of the world's finest, and the over-all impression of the paintings is overwhelming. Many works will be familiar to regular visitors. Campin's landmark Merode Triptych, one of the earliest depictions of the Annunciation in a domestic setting, and Bruegel's lunching "Harvesters" astonish each time you see them. Several works not ordinarily on permanent exhibition, such as the stunning Memling portraits and a charming Annunciation by Petrus Christus, conventionally set on a church porch beside a humble, crumbling brick wall, would be prizes for most museums. Through Jan. 3. . . . ¶ "The Ceaseless Century: Three Hundred Years of Eighteenth-Century Fashion" displays period outfits with their typical extravagance of effects (petticoats, stomachers, corseted waists, panniered skirts, flared peplums, etc.) alongside examples of their continuing influence, from nineteenth-century ball gowns and walking dresses to Dior cocktail dresses and Vivienne Westwood pirate ensembles. Through Nov. 29. . . . ¶ "The Nature of Islamic Ornament, Part II: Vegetal Patterns" identifies components of the arabesque—vine scrolls, blossoms, split leaves, and palmettes—in plant motifs from the ninth century to the eighteenth. Through Jan. 10. . . . ¶ "Ellsworth Kelly on the Roof." Through late fall. . . . ¶ "The Direct Eye," a small and unassuming show devoted to the interplay between self-taught and mainstream artists in this century, includes works by Horace Pippin, Max Weber, and Alison Saar. Through Oct. 18. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—"The New York School," a warmup exhibition for the Jackson Pollock retrospective, presents drawings by the Abstract Expressionists, including such colleagues and drinking buddies as Mark Rothko (see also the Whitney Museum), Helen Frankenthaler, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, and Willem de Kooning, all of whom helped turn the former Dutch colony into the center of the art world. Through Jan. 12. . . . ¶ A retrospective devoted to the work of Pierre Bonnard. Through Oct. 13. . . . ¶ "Aleksander Rodchenko." Through Oct. 6. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 6; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:30.)

Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—Selections from the permanent collection are on display. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 10 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 10 to 8.)

Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—Like many of his Abstract Expressionist peers, Mark Rothko began his mature career making pictures indebted to European biomorphic Surrealism, before evolving his signature style of luminous, slightly spooky rectangles piled one above the other. The horizontal axis of Rothko's paintings suggests affinities with nineteenth-century Romantic landscapes; on the other hand, the broad expanses of color and severe geometric reduction look forward to the color-field and Minimalist art of the sixties. The temptation at this retrospective is to take a bath in his luxuriant palette—to treat Rothko as an AbEx Bonnard—but one should keep in mind that the artist allied his art with the timeless and the tragic. Through Nov. 29. . . . ¶ The first full-scale retrospective of the work of Bob Thompson (1937-66), a psychedelic African-American appropriation artist whose brief and incendiary career was spent stuck in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. Through Jan. 3. (Open Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 8.)

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"Kerry James Marshall: Mementos" includes intricate and allusive paintings and sculptures (as well as a new site-specific installation) by an artist whose work is informed by events he witnessed in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, and Watts, in 1965. Through Nov. 29. . . . ¶ "Martin Lewis's World: Cityscapes on Paper" compares New York cityscapes by the printmaker (1881-1962) with photographs on the same subject by some of his contemporaries. Through Oct. 25. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays, 11 to 9; and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

China Institute, 125 E. 65th St. (744-8181)—"Chinese Snuff Bottles from the Pamela R. Lessing Friedman Collection" presents more than a hundred examples of the Lieber bag of the Qing dynasty. Through Dec. 6. (Open Mondays through Saturdays, 10 to 5, and Tuesday evenings until 8; Sundays, 1 to 5.)

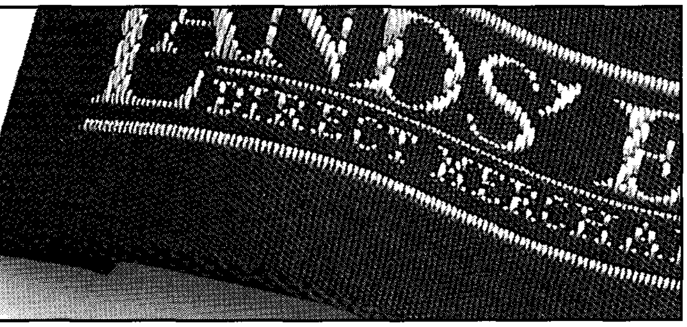
Morgan Library, 29 E. 36th St. (685-0008)—"Master Drawings from the Hermitage and Pushkin Museums" includes works by a roster of masters (Rembrandt, Dürer, Holbein, Bernini, Bellini, Rubens, Lautrec, Matisse, Picasso, Nolde, Modigliani, et al.) which are making their first appearance on these shores. Through Jan. 10. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5; Fridays, 10:30 to 8; Saturdays, 10:30 to 6; Sundays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

(Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.)

Petah Coyne—In a startling formal departure from her recent work in wax, Coyne ventures into darker territory. The sculptures in "Fairy Tales" are constructed with spiralling ropes of horsehair, coiled in elaborate patterns. These swirling fantasias tumble from the wall and erupt from the floor, ensnaring animals and birds. (The sculptor bought the stuffed specimens from a natural-history museum that was going out of busi-

TAKESHI TADATSU



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ness.) In the most monumental work, with the yucky title "Doggy-Doo," a coyote with a pheasant emerging from its head is completely enmeshed by a cloud of hair—a tableau that seems to capture the animal at the moment of death and transcendence to another plane of existence. Through Oct. 16. (Galerie Lelong, 20 W. 57th St. 315-0470.)

Sharon Horvath / Mervyn Peake (1911-68)—Maplike works of rare preciosity, at their best suggesting the elegant whimsies of Paul Klee. Painted in oil and incorporating elements of collage, Horvath's imaginary worlds are informed by dense layers of symbolism, delicately colored and strangely composed. / Peake was one of the century's great English eccentrics. Best known for his bizarre, brilliant "Gormenghast" trilogy of novels, he also possessed a witty touch with pencil and brush. This suite of fantastical creatures, entitled "Head Hunting in London," presents grotesque images of Englishmen turning into toads, crustaceans, and hideous birds of prey, emerging from miasmas of noxious blues and blacks. Both shows through Oct. 10. (De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 262-5050.)

Jason Martin / Carlo Mollino (1905-73)—Gesture meets minimalism in the cool, bold paintings of this young British artist. To each of his panels (made of copper, Plexiglas, aluminum, plastic, or steel) Martin applies a single coat of vivid paint (usually oil) with a custom-made rakelike device in one uninterrupted motion. The results are pure and visually engrossing. / Exuberant, curvilinear designs by a Turinese architect who was under-recognized in the resolutely rectilinear era in which he lived. The small exhibition contains designs for racecars and a snowplow, extensive plans for and photographs of his major building projects, and furniture. Both shows through Oct. 10. (Robert Miller, 41 E. 57th St. 980-5454.)

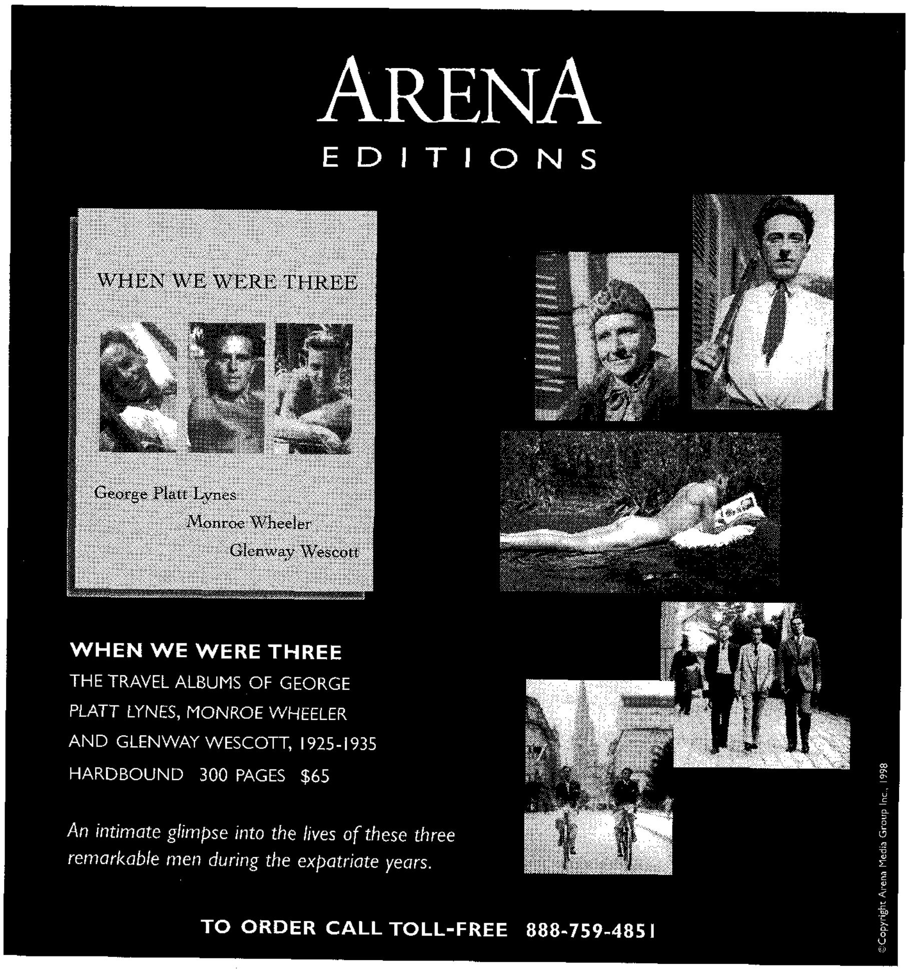
Kenneth Noland—The cool abstract master comes full circle, returning to the concentric-ring motif that established his reputation in the late fifties and early sixties. Whereas Noland's early circle paintings dealt with the emotional resonances embodied by pure color, the new work is refined, even a bit fussy. "Pink Light" has a peppermint-candy-colored ground, with a great circular swath of orange, left unfinished, like a Zen koan. "Touch" is a mesmerizing mandala, white on white on white. An important new body of work from an important artist. Through Oct. 17. (Emmerich, 41 E. 57th St. 752-0124.)

Short List—**FRANK AUERBACH** and **RACKSTRAW DOWNES**, Marlborough, 40 W. 57th St. 541-4900. Through Oct. 30. . . . **DONALD BAECHLER**, Baron/Boisanté, 50 W. 57th St. 581-9191. Through Oct. 24. . . . **GEORG BASELITZ**, Pace Wildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 421-3292. Through Oct. 10. . . . **TOM CHRISTOPHER**, David Findlay, 984 Madison Ave., at 77th St. 249-2909. Through Oct. 17. . . . **ALAN FELTUS**, Forum, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 355-4545. Through Oct. 24. . . . **JOHN LAUB**, Fischbach, 24 W. 57th St. 759-2345. Through Oct. 10. . . . **ALICE SCHILLE**, Graham, 1014 Madison Ave., at 78th St. 535-5767. Through Oct. 24. . . . **FRANK STELLA**, Sheehan, 20 W. 57th St. 489-3331. Through Oct. 10. . . . **PETER SULLIVAN**, Hirschl & Adler Modern, 21 E. 70th St. 535-8810. Through Oct. 31. . . . **JOHN WESLEY**, Danese, 41 E. 57th St. 223-2227. Through Oct. 17.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

John Ahearn—"Sculpture from East 100th Street," a group of cast-plaster works by an artist known for his social compassion. Some of the painted busts are interesting enough, but the overriding impression comes from the numerous casts of clasping hands, which have a treacly, we-are-the-world vibe. Through Oct. 24. (Alexander and Bonin, 132 Tenth Ave., at 18th St. 367-7474.)

Mat Collishaw—"Minor Cuts," an exhibit of video installations and photo-based works. Collishaw's 1988 large-scale photograph of a



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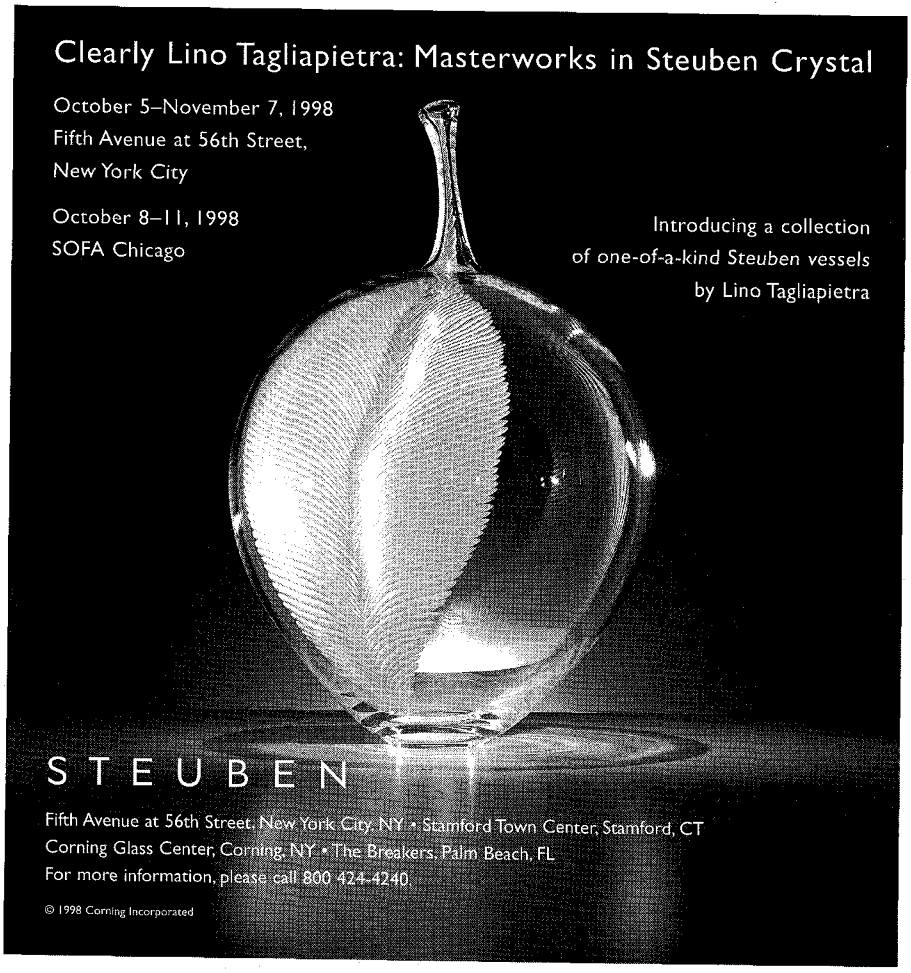

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head with a bullet hole is one of the signature images of current British art; too bad nothing here has anything like its visual simplicity and brutality. Instead, the artist treats us to the sort of elaborate models that, except for some mildly disturbing content, one might encounter at F.A.O. Schwarz. Through Oct. 17. (Bonakdar Jancou, 521 W. 21st St. 414-4144.)

Miguel Calderón—"Aggressively Mediocre / Mentally Challenged / Fantasy Island," paintings, sculptures, and video works by this Mexican artist. The paintings suggest the scenario of a cheesy action movie taking place amid South American drug-cartel luxury; the sculptures are in fact fountains, their waters tinted the blue of toilet disinfectant. The exhibition will appeal to those who enjoy wallowing in life's baser pleasures. Through Oct. 17. (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 627-6000.)

A photograph by Perry Kretz taken after the ouster of Mobutu Sese Seko from Zaire, in "Eyewitness 1998," at the World Financial Center.

COURTESY OF STERN

Alan Curral—Six short, deadpan, single-screen video works by a young Glasgow-based artist. The combination of humor and aggression may recall his fellow Glaswegian, the art star Douglas Gordon, recipient of this year's Hugo Boss Prize. In one video, the artist repeatedly barks "You're fired" into a disconnected telephone; in the next, he offers detailed word-processing tips to a computer chip. Curral's work plays into the current nostalgia for the art of the early seventies—his scenarios inescapably recall William Wegman's dumb-yet-clever videos—but such debts don't detract from Curral's aptitude for amusingly sardonic repetition. Through Oct. 10. (Goldsworthy, 453 W. 17th St. 414-4560.)

Sarah Lucas—"The Old In Out," a group of recent sculptures and photographs by the foremost "bad girl" among the current crop of young British artists. The smashed, burnt cars covered in Marlboros seem somewhat overblown; more successful is the decrepit toilet with the question "Is suicide genetic?" rudely scrawled inside. This piece is surrounded by a suite of polyurethane toilets in various colors—a direct and cutting jibe at one of the most successful and palatable of Britain's new art stars, Rachel Whiteread. Through Oct. 17. (Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 206-9300.)

Short List—**LYNDA BENGLIS**, Cheim & Read, 521 W. 23rd St. 242-7727. Through Oct. 10. . . . **ERIK A. FRANDSEN**, DCA Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 255-5511. Through Oct. 17. . . . **BARBARA GALLUCCI**, Eller, 529 W. 20th St. 206-6411. Through Oct. 10. . . . **JONATHAN HAMMER**, Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 243-0200. Through Oct. 24. . . . **ROB HORNSBY**, Debs, 529 W. 20th St. 647-7080. Through Oct. 10. . . . **ROBERT MELEE**, Kreps, 529 W. 20th St. 741-8849. Through Oct. 10. . . . **JOHN MORRIS**, D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 352-9460. Through Oct. 3. . . . **BLAKE RAYNE**, Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 463-7770. Through Oct. 10. . . . **LAURIE SIMMONS**, Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 206-7100. Through Oct. 24. . . . **DAMIEN SMITH**, Morris, 465 W. 23rd St. 727-2752. Through Oct. 17. . . . **LESLIE WAYNE**, Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 645-1701. Through Oct. 10.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Cadence Giersbach—"Plastic Replicating Garden," an installation of paintings, in yellow and black on white vinyl panels, that reproduce computer distortions of drawings the artist made of a formal English garden. A lot of skill and effort has been lavished on an idea (about familiarity and perceptual change, according to a gallery handout) that should probably have been slept off. Through Oct. 17. (Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 343-7300.)

Hoon Kwak—"Tea Ceremony" presents a hundred glazed clay teacups on black steel pedestals, fifty ghostly teacup paintings, and a wall-size scroll of more multiple teacups. The minute differences in the choice of glazes, etc., make a point about attention in the repetition of daily devotion, but it's undercut by the military sameness of the pedestals. The artist is a native of Korea who has taught in California—a whale vertebra he found on Redondo Beach and included here seems to be something of a self-portrait. Through Oct. 3. (Cowles, 420 West Broadway. 925-3500.)

Sol LeWitt—Two large-scale wall drawings ("Loopy Doopy, Orange and Green" and "Loopy Doopy, Black and White"). The floor-to-ceiling works were executed by assistants following LeWitt's precise instructions, a quasi-mechanistic procedure that can nevertheless yield works of surprising visual aplomb and vivacity. The two here are especially eye-popping; their pulsing and undulating forms suggest that, in the currently popular game of opticality, this grand old man of Conceptual art holds a few trump cards. Through Oct. 10. (Pace Wildenstein, 142 Greene St. 431-9224.)

Lisa Yuskavage—Busty, sad-eyed nudes, seen in a gauzy focus that borrows equally from *Penthouse* and De La Tour. The mixture of deformity and nubility achieves the desired effect of uncomfortable pleasure. Through Oct. 10. (Boesky, 51 Greene St. 941-9888.)

Short List—**TERRY ADKINS** and **DOTTY ATTIE**, P.P.O.W, 476 Broome St. 941-8642. Both shows through Oct. 10. . . . **LAURIE ANDERSON**, Artists Space, 38 Greene St. 226-3970. Through Nov. 7. . . . **BARRY BARTLETT** and **DON DOE**, Kustera, 41 Wooster St. 965-1527. Both shows through Oct. 17. . . . **JAYASHREE CHAKRAVARTY**, The Drawing Room, 40 Wooster St. 219-2166. Through Oct. 22. . . . **CAIO FONSECA**, Senior, 375 West Broadway. 941-0960. Through Nov. 7. . . . **JANNIS KOUNELLIS**, Ace, 275 Hudson St. 255-5599. Through Nov. 28. . . . **KATY SCHIMERT**, Zwirner, 43 Greene St. 966-9074. Through Oct. 17. . . . **JEFFREY VALLANCE**, Lehmann Maupin, 39 Greene St. 965-0753. Through Oct. 31. . . . **ALLAN WEXLER**, Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 226-3232. Through Oct. 10.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Christie's—*Oct. 2: Fine and collectible wines.* . . . ¶ Oct. 5: American gold coins. . . . ¶ Oct. 5-6: Photography auctions, including (on the evening of Oct. 5) the Barry Friedman collection of more than a hundred and fifty avant-garde photographs, by Man Ray, Alexander Rodchenko, and other luminaries. (Park Ave. at 59th St. 546-1000.) . . . At **CHRISTIE'S EAST:** American paintings (Oct. 1) and decorative art (Oct. 5). (219 E. 67th St. 606-0400.)

Sotheby's—Oct. 1: A sale of rugs and carpets. . . . ¶ Oct. 6: Impressionist and modern paintings. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)

Phillips—Oct. 1-2: An auction of fine wines. . . . ¶ Oct. 5: Coins. . . . ¶ Oct. 6: Photography. (406 E. 79th St. 570-4830.)

Doyle—Works in the Art Nouveau and Art Deco style, including a single-owner assemblage of more than seventy-five Rookwood ceramic pieces. (175 E. 87th St. 427-2730. Oct. 6.)

Swann—A photography auction includes a group of five forensic closeups of the Lizzie Borden crime scene. (104 E. 25th St. 254-4710. Oct. 5.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

Shelby Lee Adams—"Appalachian Legacy," a powerful selection of portraits of families living in eastern Kentucky. Through Oct. 10. (Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255.)

Jeff Brouws—Lucid color landscapes of the motels, coffee shops, gas stations, and tractor trailers that populate America's interstates and lesser highways. Through Oct. 17. (Mann, 42 E. 76th St. 570-1223.)

Miles Coolidge—Astoundingly panoramic prints—the average is ten inches by eleven feet—that capture, in hazy, muted greens and browns, the flat agricultural fields of California's Central Valley. Through Oct. 10. (Kaplan, 48 Greene St. 226-6131.)

"The American Century: Observations and Metaphors"—Part two of this gallery's exploration of the power of the image covers the years 1936 to 1967 and includes work by André Kertész, Dorothea Lange, Edward Weston, and Robert Frank. Through Oct. 17. (Danziger, 851 Madison Ave., at 70th St. 734-5300.)

"Eyewitness 1998"—The best press photographs of 1997, selected by the World Press Photo Foundation. Through Oct. 4. (North Bridge, World Financial Center, Battery Park City. Open daily, twenty-four hours.)

International Center of Photography—"Walker Evans, Simple Secrets," a show of works from the collection of Marian and Benjamin A. Hill. . . . ¶ "Intimate City: The Photographs of Thomas Roma." Both shows through Nov. 29. (1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. 860-1777. Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 5; Fridays, 10 to 8; and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6.)

International Center of Photography Midtown—"Seeing Is Believing," a survey of the work of Vik Muniz. Through Nov. 8. (Sixth Ave. at 43rd St. 860-1777. Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 5; Fridays, 10 to 8; and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6.)

Short List—**SALLY APFELBAUM** and **NICHOLAS BARKER**, Saul, 560 Broadway. 431-0747. Both shows through Oct. 17. . . . **EUGÈNE ATGET**, Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 752-1223. Through Oct. 10. . . . **HARRY CALLAHAN** and **ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG**, Pace Wildenstein MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 759-7999. Both shows through Oct. 24. . . . **ELLEN CAREY** and **AMANDA MEANS**, Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819. Both shows through Oct. 10. . . . **LARRY CLARK**, Luh-

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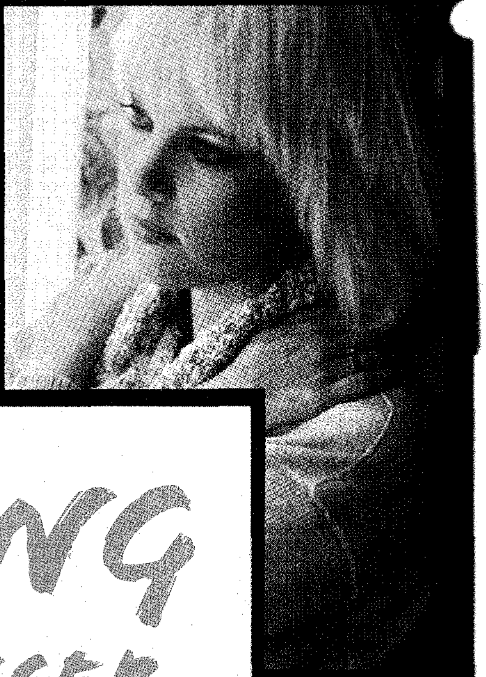

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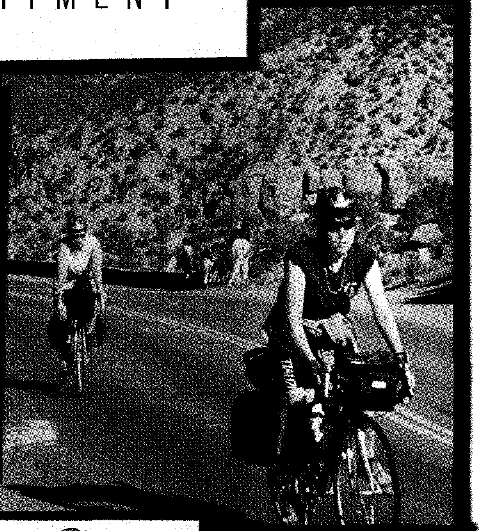

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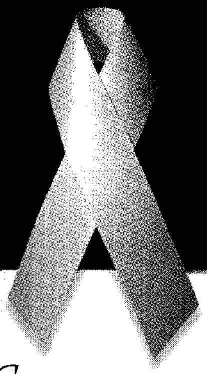

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ring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 206-9100. Through Oct. 24. . . . **REGINA DE LUISE**, Benrubi, 52 E. 76th St. 517-3766. Through Oct. 10. . . . **MACDUFF EVERTON**, Borden, 560 Broadway. 431-0166. . . . **SUSAN MEISELAS**, Leica, 670 Broadway. 777-3051. Opens Saturdays at noon. Through Oct. 24. . . . **RAY K. METZKER** and **ALBERT RENGER-PATZSCH**, Laurence Miller, 138 Spring St. 226-1220. Both shows through Oct. 31. . . . **GORDON PARKS**, Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010. Through Oct. 31. . . . **TOMIO SEIKE**, Gallery 292, at 120 Wooster St. 431-0292. Through Oct. 31. . . . **BRETT WESTON**, Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 750-7070. Through Nov. 7.

(See the museum listings for photography exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA—**LOHENGRIN**, with Karita Mattila, Deborah Polaski, Ben Heppner, Falk Struckman, and René Pape; conducted by James Levine. (Sept. 30 and Oct. 6 at 7 and Oct. 3 at 12:30.) . . . **SAMSON ET DALILA**, with Olga Borodina, Plácido Domingo, and Sergei Leiferkus; Mr. Levine. (Oct. 1 and Oct. 5 at 8.) . . . **TOSCA**, with Eva Urbanová, Richard Leech, Alain Fondary, and David Evitts; Nello Santi. (Oct. 2 at 8.) . . . **AIDA**, with Maria Guleghina, Nina Terentieva, Vladimir Bogachov, and Gregg Baker; with Mr. Domingo conducting. (Oct. 3 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA—Sept. 30 at 7:30 and Oct. 3 at 8: "Il Barbiere di Siviglia." . . . ¶ Oct. 1 at 7:30 and Oct. 4 at 1:30: "Tosca." . . . ¶ Oct. 2 at 8 and Oct. 3 at 1:30: A double bill of Weill's "The Seven Deadly Sins" and Orff's "Carmina Burana." . . . ¶ Oct. 6 at 7:30: The opening performance of Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice," never before presented by the company, in a new co-production with the English National Opera which is advertised as containing extensive nudity (thanks to director Martha Clarke). (New York State Theatre. 870-5570.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC—Kurt Masur concludes his survey of Beethoven symphonies by conducting a long program comprising the Eighth and the Ninth. The latter includes the participation of soprano Kelley Nassief, mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson, tenor John Aler, baritone Håkan Hagegård, the American Boychoir, and the Westminster Symphonic Choir. (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5030. Oct. 1-3 at 8. . . . **NOTE**: On Oct. 2 at 7, in a pre-concert recital open to ticket holders, Ms. Simpson, Mr. Aler, and a trio of the orchestra's members perform six of Beethoven's settings of British folk songs.)

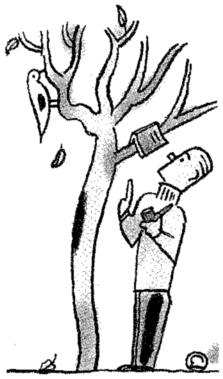
ST. PETERSBURG PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA—At Carnegie Hall, Yuri Temirkanov conducting. Oct. 1 at 8: Performing Georgi Sviridov's "Small Triptych," Schumann's Piano Concerto (with Jonathan Gilad), and Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps." . . . ¶ Oct. 2 at 8: Shostakovich's "Festive Overture" and Violin Concerto No. 2 (featuring Gidon Kremer), and Prokofiev's Symphony No. 7. . . . ¶ Oct. 3 at 8: Liadov's "The Enchanted Lake" and "Kikimora," suites from two operas by Rimsky-Korsakov ("The Tale of Tsar Sultan" and "The Golden Cockerel"), and Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé" Suites No. 1 and No. 2. (247-7800.)

AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA—Leon Botstein, the group's conductor, is always on the alert to spy the overlooked. Here he presents an intriguing curiosity, a semi-staged concert adaptation of the last two acts ("Kings" and "Prophecies") from Kurt Weill's "The Eternal Road," which has not been performed in this country since its world première, which Max Reinhardt directed at the Manhattan Opera House, in 1937. In fact, it was in order to oversee this piece that the composer moved to America, in 1935, although he had

BOOK CURRENTS

Matters Metrical

SPEAKING of the generally impecunious lot of versifiers, Oliver Goldsmith observed, "Could a man live by it, it were not unpleasant employment to be a poet." England and the United States both retain a poet laureate, but thousands of poets who won't make laureate persist in their trade with no surer reward than love of craft.


EVER MEULEN

Still, as David Lehman writes in his foreword to **THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 1998** (Scribner), "the prestige of the art has steadily climbed since this decade began." The generous anthology includes more than seventy entries from the celebrated (Edward Hirsch, Anne Carson, Robert Pinsky) to the all but unknown. And increasingly, poetry is popping up in unlikely places: the Web site Poetry Daily publishes a new poem every day, while New York subway posters greet straphangers with stanzas from Blake to Langston Hughes. Meanwhile, dozens of more conventionally packaged collections of poetry continue to nourish old appetites and whet new ones.

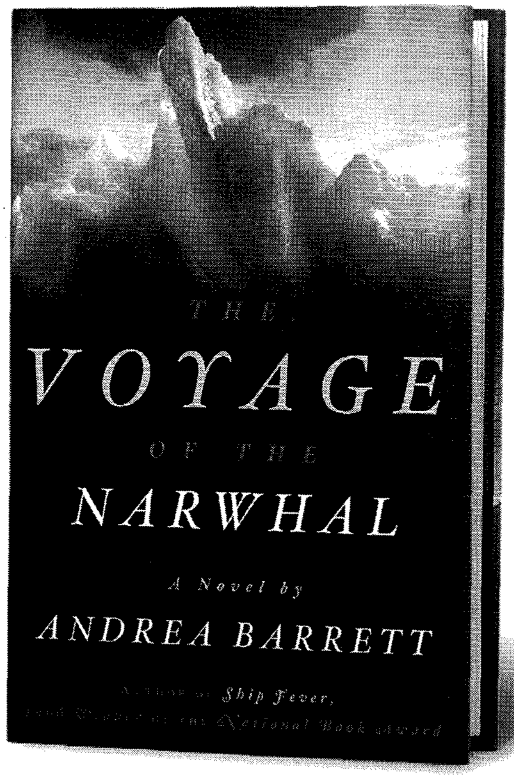
THE YALE YOUNGER POETS ANTHOLOGY presents some of this century's greats—including John Ashbery, W. S. Merwin, and Adrienne Rich—at the dawn of their powers. Claudia Rankine's **THE END OF THE ALPHABET** (Grove) tracks urban mores with casual precision, while the poems in Virginia Hamilton Adair's **BELIEFS & BLASPHEMIES** (Random House) resonate like songs of experience from another time: in "One Only," a poem of lost love, she muses, "The winter-fearing heart implores / fire from a touch, a look, a voice; / yet soon the bodies, names, and faces / turn away into empty places."

Geoffrey Hill's unforgiving poems in **THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE** (Houghton Mifflin) examine moral and mental laziness. In one, he asks "So what is faith if it is not / inescapable endurance?" L. S. Asekoff, a more easygoing philosopher, tracks human frailties in **NORTH STAR** (Orchises). "You are travelling light, carrying nothing with you / but what you have lost," he writes coolly. "I guess you could say you are doing as well / as can be expected." Poetry, it seems, is doing even better.

Books.

[AT BARNES & NOBLE]

Andrea Barrett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Prices effective at store locations through 10/21/98 already fled his native Germany two years earlier for the (temporarily) safe haven of Paris. Weill originally wrote this vast four-part Biblical oratorio for double chorus, large orchestra, and many featured performers—it requires no fewer than twenty-four vocal soloists (with some doubling possible), in addition to numerous speaking parts—to a German libretto by the novelist Franz Werfel. At its première, however, it was offered in an English translation, as it is in this concert. (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5030. Oct. 4 at 3.)

English Chamber Orchestra—Pinchas Zukerman doubles as conductor and soloist in concertos by Vivaldi ("Il Sospetto") and Mozart (his Fifth) and puts down his violin to lead a suite from the opera "Los Alamos," by Marc Neikrug (his longtime chamber-music partner), as well as Mozart's Symphony No. 41 (the "Jupiter"). (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. Oct. 5 at 8.)

Chamber Orchestra Kremlin—Misha Rachlevsky conducts the highly regarded eighteen-member Moscow-based string ensemble in the Chamber Symphony No. 3 of Mieczyslaw (also known as Moisei) Vainberg, as well as works by Steven Gerber, Salim Krymski, and Tchaikovsky (his Serenade for Strings). (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. Oct. 6 at 8.)

RECITALS

Bargemusic—Beethoven's Clarinet Trio, Bartók's "Contrasts," and Hindemith's Clarinet Quartet are performed by clarinettist Todd Palmer, violinist Kerry McDermott, cellist Fred Sherry, and pianist Anne-Marie McDermott. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061. Oct. 1 at 7:30 and Oct. 4 at 4.)

David Starobin—The guitarist performs two works by the nineteenth-century guitarist and composer Fernando Sor (his Twelve Pieces, Op. 31, and his Fantaisie, Op. 54, with Jorge Caballero assisting as second guitarist in the latter), short dance movements by five composers who contributed to his recent project, "Newdance" (Elliott Carter, Jorge Morel, Richard Wernick, Paul Lansky, and Bryan Johanson), and the United States première of George Crumb's "Mundus Canis" ("A Dog's World"), which Starobin introduced last January, in France. Through the years, Crumb and his wife have owned, or been owned by, four dachshunds and a bichon frise (though not all at the same time), and the five "humoresques" of this suite pay tribute to the personalities of each: Tammy (in the opening movement, marked "Elegantly, somewhat freely"), Fritzi ("Furioso"), Heidel ("Languido un poco misterioso," with the guitarist using a bottleneck to achieve blues-style glissandos), Emma-Jean ("Coquettish"), and Yoda (the bichon frise, and a particularly lively one, if the tempo instruction "Prestissimo possibile" is to be believed). The composer will be on hand to assist, playing various percussion instruments that are called for throughout the piece. (Borden Auditorium, Manhattan School of Music, Broadway at 122nd St. 749-2802, ext. 428. Oct. 1 at 8.)

Susanne Mentzer and Craig Rutenberg—The mezzo-soprano and the pianist present a gender-balanced recital of songs by Clara Schumann, Lisbeth Alexander-Katz, both Gustav and Alma Mahler, Duparc, and Satie. (Weill Recital Hall, at Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. Oct. 2 at 8.)

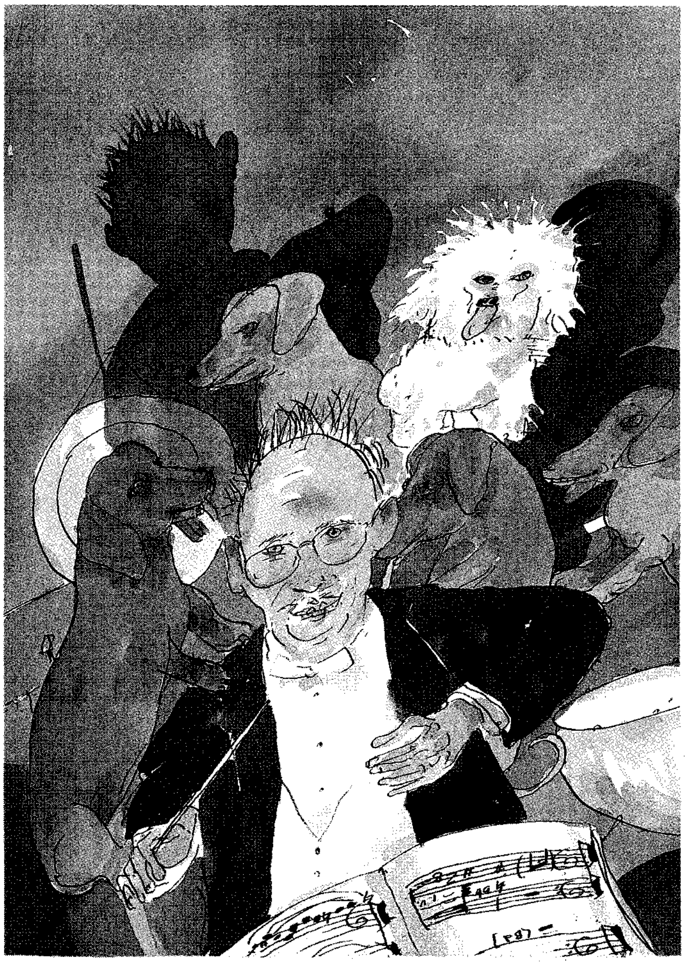
City Island Baroque Ensemble—Soprano Cleo Reiss is featured in Bach's Cantatas No. 51 and No. 82, with the obbligato instrumental parts entrusted to trumpeter Alex Holton and oboist Keve Wilson. (Le Refuge Inn, 620 City Island Ave., City Island, the Bronx. 718-885-2478. Oct. 4 at noon.)

Dawn Upshaw and Stephen Powell—The soprano and the baritone, both of whom have benefitted from the support of the George London Foundation, open that organization's concert series by performing songs, arias, and duets by Mozart, Schubert, Ives, Gershwin, and others with pianist John Churchwell assisting. Anna Moffo will be on hand to share her memories of Mr. London, the bass with whom she occasionally appeared onstage. (Morgan Library, 29 E. 36th St. 685-0008, ext. 347. Oct. 4 at 4.)

American Chamber Players—The five instrumentalists offer a concert comprising Mozart's D-Major Flute Quartet, Duruflé's "Prélude, Recitatif et Variations" (for flute, viola, and piano), and piano quartets by Lekeu (in B Minor) and Dvořák (in E-Flat Major, Op. 87). (Frick Collection, 1 E. 70th St. 288-0700. Oct. 4 at 5.)

Gerre Hancock and **Kent Tritle**—The organists, in a concert dedicating the two-manual, forty-one-rank, tracker-action N. P. Mander organ that has been installed at the Church of St. Agnes, newly rebuilt following a devastating fire in 1992. Mr. Tritle plays Reger's Introduction and Passacaglia in D Minor, a Brahms chorale prelude, and Franck's A-Minor Choral; Mr. Hancock offers works by Bach and de Grigny, plus one of his signature improvisations. (143 E. 43rd St. 969-0055. Oct. 5 at 7:30.)

Ariel Shamai—The violinist is assisted by pianist Ilan Rechtman in sonatas by Schumann (his First) and Beethoven (his Eighth). (Mansfield Hotel, 12 W. 44th St. Oct. 5 at 8. No tickets necessary.)



George Crumb's "Mundus Canis," performed in its American première by guitarist David Starobin, at Borden Auditorium.

ROBERT ANDREW PARKER

Sonic Boom Festival—The seventh annual installment of this varied exploration of new music opens with the New York New Music Ensemble's performance of works by Donald Martino and Matthew Rosenblum. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 854-7799. Oct. 6 at 8.)

Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio—The distinguished piano trio is dedicating this season to a survey of the complete piano trios of Beethoven and Shostakovich (plus the string sonatas of the latter). This opening concert offers well-turned early works by both: the first two of Beethoven's Three Trios (Op. 1) and Shostakovich's C-Minor Piano Trio (composed in 1923, while he was a student at the St. Petersburg—then Petrograd—Conservatory). (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. Oct. 6-7 at 8.)

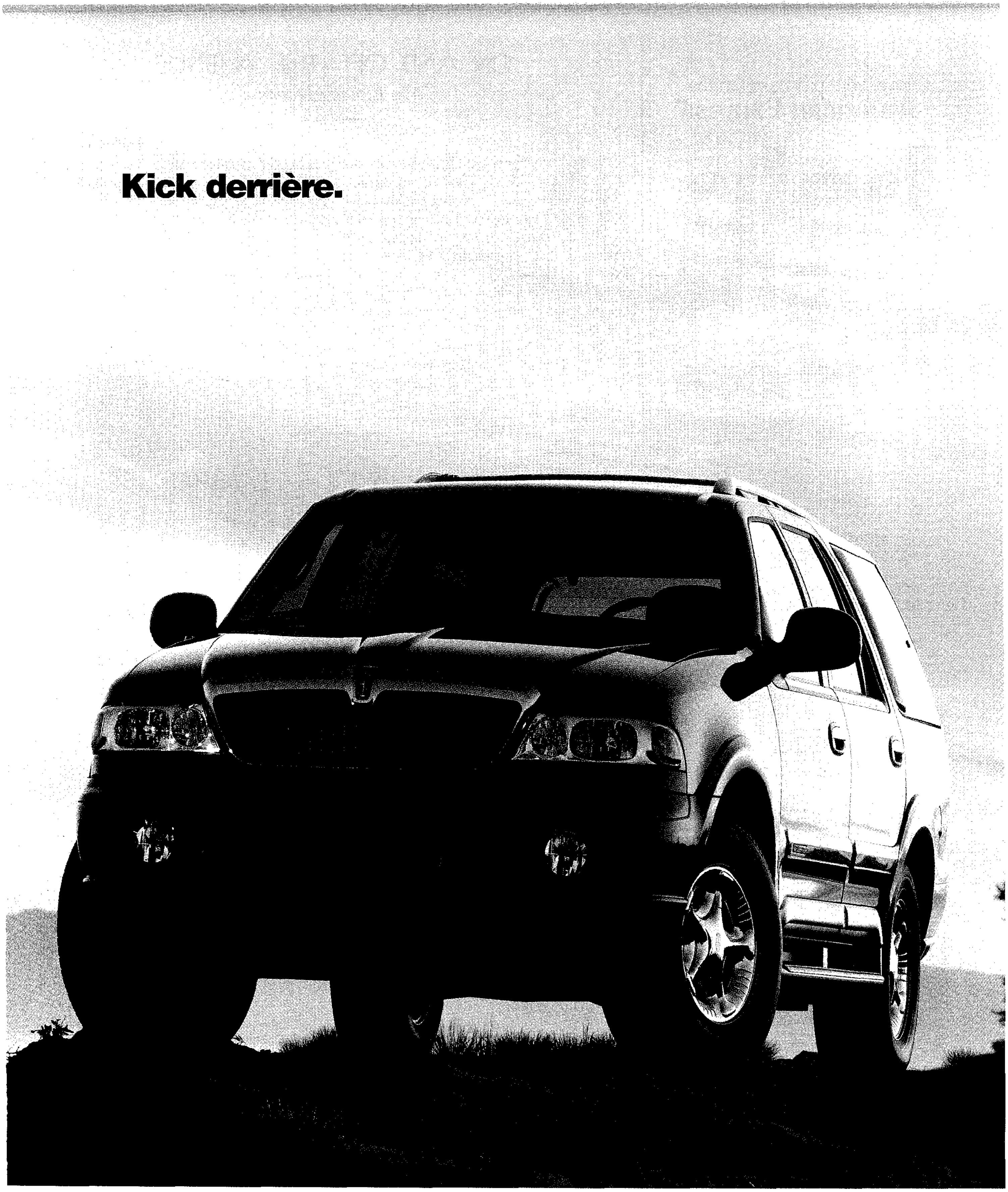
ABOVE AND BEYOND

The New Grand Central—After a multimillion-dollar renovation (which is not quite finished), politicians and the folks from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority take a much deserved bow at the rededication of the eighty-five-year-old terminal, on Oct. 1, starting at 11 A.M. In addition to the obligatory speeches, restored railroad cars will be on display, documentary films will be screened, and visitors will get a chance to take a close-up look at a one-and-a-half-ton cast-iron bald eagle that once rested atop the 1898 Grand Central Station and will soon be placed high above the terminal's entrance at 43rd Street and Lexington Avenue. The following evening, starting at 7:30, there will be a laser light show, live music, and trapeze artists from the Big Apple Circus swinging beneath the Main Concourse's Sky Ceiling.

Aw Shucks!—In the late nineteenth century, the bottom of New York Harbor was lined with some nine thousand acres of oyster beds. During the best years of that period, up to fifteen hundred men were employed harvesting the bivalves, and as many as five hundred thousand bushels were sent to restaurants and markets as far away as London. On Oct. 3, from noon to 9, the block in front of the Merchant's House Museum, a historic home at 29 E. 4th St. that depicts life in nineteenth-century Manhattan, will be the site of the second annual Guinness Oyster Festival. Look for performances by Black 47, Five Chinese Brothers, and other bands, as well as an oyster-shucking competition featuring chefs from Balthazar, Blue Water Grill, and other restaurants. The Blue Points for sale, alas, aren't all that local; they come from Long Island Sound.

Readings—Oct. 5 at 7: By playwright Elizabeth Swados, from her novel, "Flamboyant." (A Different Light Bookstore, 151 W. 19th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ Oct. 5 at 7:30: By poets David Lehman and Rosanne Wasserman. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ Oct. 6 at 7:30: By Billy Collins, Sandra Maria Esteves, Maya Alba, and other poets. (Meow Mix, E. Houston St. at Suffolk St. Tickets at the door.)

Talks—¶ Oct. 5 at 7:30: United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky explains poetry. (Barnes & Noble, 33 E. 17th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ Oct. 6 at 6: Laser artist Shimon Attie discusses his latest project, an upcoming installation on the streets of the Lower East Side. (Great Hall, Cooper Union, Third Ave. at 7th St. 980-4575.)



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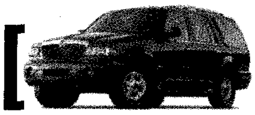
Lincoln Navigator. What a luxury [] should be.

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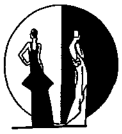
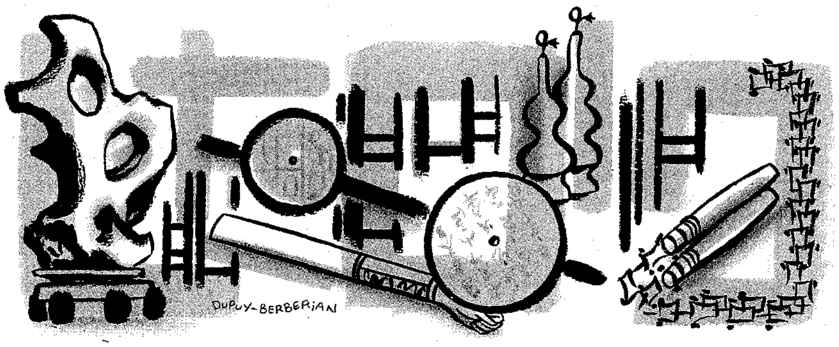
ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Mr. Lipton's Teahouse



THE Chinese are so good at manufacturing the disposable essentials of modern life—from jeans to golf balls—that it's not surprising that they were once the world's preëminent makers of back scratchers, opium pipes, and cricket cages. These reminders of more indulgent times in imperial China can be found at **WILLIAM LIPTON LTD.** (27 E. 61st St.; 751-8131), a pocket-size emporium specializing in antique Chinese furniture, rugs, art, and artifacts which might be the most recherché little shop around the corner in Manhattan. "You can see that it's been very lovingly rubbed," the proprietor, William Lipton, says, holding up a miniature, wood-slatted penitentiary, which has a sliding entrance just big enough to welcome your clicking pet insect. Asked about the price of this and the other cricket cages on display, Mr. Lipton, a friendly, bespectacled man, says with a vague smile, "They range from a few hundred dollars to a thousand."



Mr. Lipton's gallery has the feeling of a venerable, aristocratic tea shop, even though it is less than ten years old. The walls are a pale, streaked ochre—the color of green tea. A garden of bamboo, Asian maples, and stone statuary beckons in the back, beyond shelves of Asian-art books. Bamboo birdcages house ivory and porcelain feeding cups; the most striking one—a "pavilion cage"—sells for $10,000. Three of the cages are also occupied by Chinese songbirds. "Only one of them sings on command," Mr. Lipton says apologetically. A few minutes later, all three birds raise their voices in cheerful dissonance. "They have a regular singing time," their keeper says, looking at his watch. It's noon.

No object, no matter how homely, seems to have been beyond the flair of Mr. Lipton's anonymous craftsmen. A lantern holder made of *zitan*, the most highly prized Chinese wood, has an unexpected ripple as pleasing to the hand as to the eye; it sells for $1,500. An assortment of extremely rare "scholars' rocks"—flamelike chunks of stone that bring to mind the folds in the robe of Rodin's Balzac—were collected as examples of inanimate nature's ability to conjure up animate forms (prices range from $1,600 to $37,000). A lacquered, leathered, and bronze-studded pair of trunks big enough for an empress's dowry, may have been used for nothing more than military transport ($42,000).

Opium pipes come with wispily inscribed dampers made from the valuable Yixing clay ($4,000-$16,000). Asked whether he's had firsthand experience with them, Mr. Lipton says mysteriously, "Years ago, I was taken to an opium den in Laos by a Thai princess." He is extremely pleased by an unusually long, lacquered tobacco pipe, which sells for $1,800. "I love the notion that you have to have someone by your side to light it," he says.

He is uncertain about the use of several heavy stone tiles with handles carved in the form of a crawling child: "They may have been used as a tofu press, a shoe press, or a baby tetherer," he says, explaining that a toddler would have been restrained from straying by a cord attached to the handle ($1,500). Mr. Lipton is not above displaying an array of exquisite tchotchkes from the hands of contemporary craftsmen. The most cunning of them, which he himself designed, is a chopstick holder made of deerhorn in the shape of a fish, with a tiny ruby eye ($250 for a pair).

He taps a hoary bronze bell that makes a hollow sound. Asked why the bell has lost its tone, Mr. Lipton replies, "It dates from the reign of the last Ming emperor—the only Chinese emperor who committed suicide." The price? "Four thousand dollars," Mr. Lipton says sadly. "It's getting harder to find good things."

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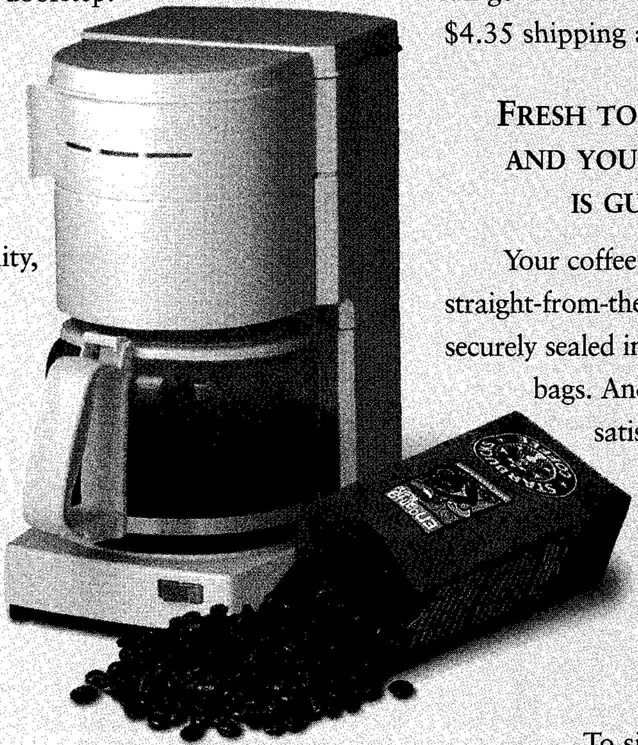

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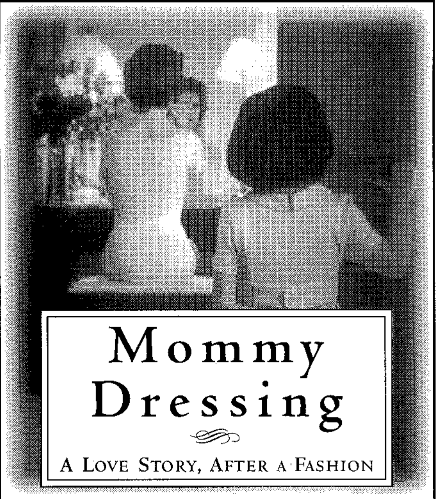
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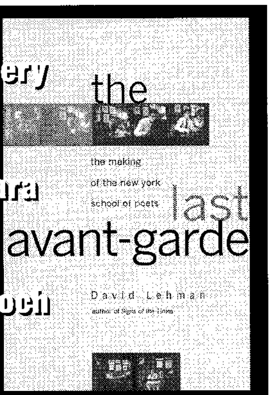
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Antz—An animated film about a worker ant who becomes a hero warrior ant. Directed by Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson; with the voices of Woody Allen, Sharon Stone, Gene Hackman, and Sylvester Stallone. Opening Oct. 2. (Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, State, and Village Theatre VII.)

Hit Me—A drama about a hotel bellhop (Elias Koteas), based on Jim Thompson's novel "A Swell-Looking Babe." Directed by Steven Shainberg. Opening Oct. 2. (Quad Cinema.)

The Impostors—Two out-of-work actors in the nineteen-thirties stow away on a cruise ship, in this comedy, written and directed by, and starring, Stanley Tucci. Also with Oliver Platt and Alfred Molina. Opening Oct. 2. (Angelika Film Center, Cinema I, and Lincoln Square.)

A Night at the Roxbury—A comedy about two brothers (Will Ferrell and Chris Kattan) trying to get into a popular Los Angeles club. Directed by John Fortenberry. Opening Oct. 2.

La Séparation—Christian Vincent's drama about a marriage going bad, based on the novel by Don Franck. With Isabelle Huppert and Daniel Auteuil. In French. Opening Oct. 2. (Quad Cinema.)

StrangeLand—Two teen-age girls run away from home to meet a man (Dee Snider) they talk to in an Internet chat room, in this thriller directed by John Pieplow and written by Snider. Opening Oct. 2. (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, Eastside Playhouse, 84th Street Sixplex, and Waverly.)

What Dreams May Come—A story of love in the hereafter, with Robin Williams, Annabella Sciorra, and Cuba Gooding, Jr. Written by Ron Bass, directed by Vincent Ward. Opening Oct. 2. (Chelsea Cinemas, Coronet Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, Orpheum VII, Village Theatre VII, and Ziegfeld.)

FILM NOTES

(If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.)

The Haunted House (1921)—Buster Keaton had the time of his life imagining his death in this elaborate twenty-five-minute short, which culminates in a stairway to Heaven followed by a chute to Hell. When counterfeiters try to turn their home base into a haunted house, honest cashier Keaton comes up against counterfeit *ghosts*—along with a couple of real ones, and, amazingly yet wonderfully, the cast of a pitiful production of "Faust." It's Keaton at his surreal peak. Also showing: "The Frozen North" (1922), a jarringly brutal parody of William S. Hart, set in the Yukon; and "Neighbors" (1921), a roistering tenement romance with some nifty clothesline gags.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; Oct. 5.)

Lolita—After a drearily predictable fuss, and a showing on cable TV, Adrian Lyne's version of the Nabokov novel finally staggers into movie theatres. The irony is that the picture itself is tender and even rather tame—so respectful toward the pathos of the original, and so wary of Nabokov's more brazen comic endeavors, that many viewers, far from being outraged, will be surprised by the air of art-house politesse. In the title role, the skinny flirtations of Dominique Swain (and, on occasion, of her body double) are a decided improvement on the sluggish Sue Lyon, who starred in Stanley Kubrick's awkward assault on the novel in 1962. If you like Jeremy Irons, you will enjoy his panicky yet mournful embodiment of Humbert Humbert; if you don't like him, you'll probably enjoy it even more, and get a kick from his sneaky, self-deluding misdeeds. All movie adaptations of Nabokov fall short, by definition, but this one is the most graceful failure so far.—*Anthony Lane* (2/23-3/2/98) (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. . . . ¶ Cinema I; through Oct. 1.)

Ronin—John Frankenheimer's action thriller about a group of retired international spies (including Robert De Niro, Jean Reno, Sean Bean, and Natascha McElhone) and a mysterious briefcase. (Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema.) (Chelsea Cinemas, Coronet Cinemas, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, Metro Cinema, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Showplace, and Village Theatre VII.)

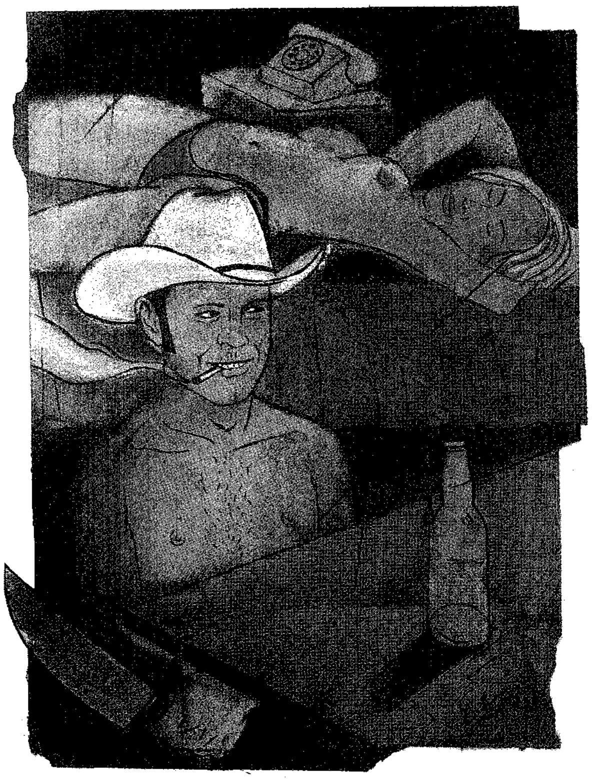
Rounders—Screenwriters Brian Koppelman and David Levien have given some crackerjack card-shark dialogue to two hot young actors—Matt Damon and Edward Norton—and together with John Dahl's atmospheric direction they've all made a dream of a poker movie. While the plot is creaky (both "The Cincinnati Kid" and "The Hustler" weigh in) and women take a back seat to poker-playing buddies (Famke Janssen and Gretchen Mol seem cast purely to establish the heterosexuality of the lead characters), there is a sleekness to the gambler-in-debt-to-the-mob storytelling that's quite pleasing. Norton has the flashier role, and at times he pulls it together like a young De Niro—he can be amazingly, destructively attractive. But Damon is the real star here, and his performance (including an emotionally nuanced voice-over) is as solid and understated as his work in "The Rainmaker."—*Bruce Diones* (Coronet Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, Olympia, Orpheum VII, State, and Village East Cinemas.)

Rush Hour—Jackie Chan returns to American films in this mediocre action comedy, which co-stars helium-voiced comedian Chris Tucker. They play detectives on the trail of Asian kidnappers, and Chan, thankfully, has been given some room to orchestrate a few fine physical gags; otherwise the direction, by Brett Ratner, is clueless. Tucker vogues his performance—he's all large gestures and posturing—and his fast-talking character delivers tired dialogue full of bad jokes on Asian stereotypes. It's not much fun to watch.—*B.D.* (Astor Plaza, Chelsea West, 84th Street Sixplex, Metro Cinema, Murray Hill Cinemas, Orpheum VII, Sutton, and Village East Cinemas.)

Simon Birch—If there's such a thing as Protestant schmalz, this is it. "Suggested by" John Irving's "A Prayer for Owen Meany," this tale of faith, fate, death, and redemption is non-threatening and also non-inspiring. Set in 1964 in a New England town where the last baseball game of the season is played on October 30—with the trees still full of leaves—and the school year starts soon thereafter (can we get a continuity check, please?), it's the story of two twelve-year-olds who have bonded over their mutual outsiderness: Simon (Ian Michael Smith), who's abnormally small, and Joe (Joseph Mazzello), who needs to solve the mystery of his father's identity. The comedy is of the eavesdropping-at-the-door-then-falling-through variety, the dramatics are strictly "Perils of Pauline," and the theology is suitable for innocent children.—*Ken Marks* (Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema II, Guild, Lincoln Square, and Village East Cinemas.)

Slums of Beverly Hills—Natasha Lyonne, who played Woody Allen's daughter in "Everyone Says I Love You," is busting out all over as Vivian Abramowitz; her teen-age body is putting her through more changes than she can keep up with. She's also a member of a nomadic Jewish family desperately clinging to the fringes of the middle class in mid-seventies Southern California. Alan Arkin plays the proud, hapless father of a brood that's not dysfunctional, really, just deeply odd. Writer-director Tamara Jenkins hits on a visual style that perfectly reflects her script's endearing juxtaposition of wackiness, sweetness, and sorrow.—*K.M.* (Angelika Film Center, Chelsea Cinemas, and 62nd & Broadway. . . . ¶ Eastside Playhouse; through Oct. 1.)

A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries—Merchant and Ivory once again visit a period laden with nostalgia. In this adaptation of Kaylie Jones's autobiographical novel of growing up as the daughter of the novelist James Jones in Paris and Long Island in the nineteen-seventies, a much maligned era has some of its dignity restored. The story is told through the eyes of our narrator as a child, and later, after she's become a transatlantic teen-ager (precociously acted by the fourteen-year-old Leelee Sobieski). By then, her childhood relationships—the nanny who won't leave the family to start her own, the gay school friend who falls in love with her—have been abandoned by the film, just as they were by the family. What makes the movie memorable is the over-all excellence of the performers; the adults—Barbara Hershey, who plays a loving alcoholic mother, and Kris Kristofferson, whose wizened machismo hits the war novelist square in the eye—don't outshine the kids.—*Jay Fielden* (Paris.)



Georgina Cates aned Vince Vaughn in "Clay Pigeons."

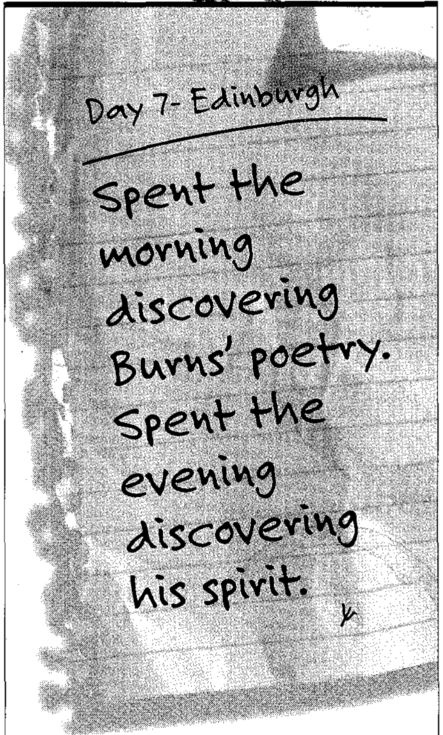
EDEL RODRIGUEZ

Strike (1924)—Sergei Eisenstein's pulsating first feature, about a strike in a Russian factory, caused another brilliant Soviet director, Grigori Kozintsev, to remark: "All that we've been doing up to now is baby stuff." At the start of his filmmaking career, Eisenstein already had a fierce kinetic sense, a picture-maker's eye, and a peerless instinct for intensifying shock, suspense, and emotion with dynamic editing. The surging confrontations between the proletariat and the police are justly celebrated. The film is equally powerful when Eisenstein suggests escalating tensions through shadowy, rippling imagery, or when he hinges massive scenes on emotion-charged details—like the strap of a humiliated factory employee who's getting ready to hang himself. The Alloy Orchestra, nonpareil at stretching staccato percussion into sinuous rhythmic lines, delivers aural lightning to match the movie's visual thunder.—*M.S.* (Walter Reade Theatre; Oct. 1.)

There's Something About Mary—The Farrelly Brothers, who have tipped the outrageousness scale before ("Dumb and Dumber," "Kingpin"), come up with some great new gross-out gags in this romantic comedy. The star, Cameron Diaz, in her Olivia Newton-John haircut, is the perfect naïve foil—she looks like she never knows what hit her. As the two loopy guys who are in love with her, Matt Dillon and Ben Stiller are garishly charming and full of desperate and irreverent ploys to get the girl. The film is packed with tasteless jokes (the best of them are crudely sexual), and it has a refreshing mean-spiritedness.—*B.D.* (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Showplace, and Village East Cinemas.)

Touch of Evil—There have been three subtly different versions of Orson Welles's ornate thriller since it first came out, in 1958. The fourth should be the last: working from a memo that Welles wrote at the time, after the studio had messed with his original cut, producer Rick Schmidlin and editor Walter Murch have come as close to honoring the director's intentions as anyone ever will. At first glance, little has changed; the titles (and Henry Mancini's brassy theme) have disappeared from the celebrated opening shot, but from then on the basic thrust of this Mexican border tale (filmed in Venice, California) remains intact. We still have the manly Vargas (Charlton Heston) struggling to solve the case of the car bomb while his wife (Janet Leigh) feels the heat from a gang of local hoods; we are still thrown by the freakish cameos by Zsa Zsa Gabor and Mercedes McCambridge, and the horrific slaying—a kind of jazz strangulation—of the fleshly Grandi (Akim Tamiroff); and, of course, we still see Welles himself as police chief Hank Quinlan, looming over the action like a Falstaff gone to seed. If anything, the cuts and repairs make the work more fluid and less flamboyant; it was sometimes the studio, rather than Welles himself, who liked to go over the top. His scenes with brothel-keeper Marlene Dietrich have nothing to do with the plot and everything to do with the rotting heart of this amazing fable: the apotheosis of pulp.—*A.L.* (9/21/98) (Film Forum.)

Your Friends & Neighbors—Another dirty comedy of bad manners from director Neil LaBute. The contemptuous heroes of his last picture, "In the Company of Men," were venal enough, but, compared to the inhabitants of the new movie, they seem about as noxious as the Hardy Boys. This time we are introduced to two couples: Mary (Amy Brenneman) lives with Barry (Aaron Eckhart), while Terri (Catherine Keener) lives with Jerry (Ben Stiller). Jerry starts an affair with Mary (what



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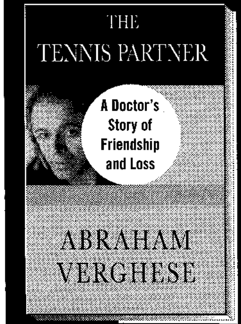

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does she see in him?), Terri falls for a gallery assistant called Cheri (Nastassja Kinski), and Barry, the only sensible one, continues to have sex with himself. It's hard to care about the damage these people do to each other, since most of it will strike the audience as richly deserved. Jason Patric plays Cary, a good-looking monster who has the nerve to suggest that, in a glum world, he's actually having fun.—*A.L.* (8/24-31/98) (East 85th Street, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Waverly.)

ALSO PLAYING

THE BRANDON TEENA STORY: Film Forum. . . . **CLAY PIGEONS:** Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, State, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **LETHAL WEAPON 4:** Worldwide Cinemas. . . . **MONUMENT AVE.:** Angelika Film Center. . . . **NEXT STOP WONDERLAND:** Cinema 3rd Avenue, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, and Village East Cinemas. . . . **ONE TRUE THING** (reviewed in our issue of 9/28/98): Beekman, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 34th Street Showplace, and Waverly. . . . **PECKER:** Angelika Film Center, First & 62nd Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Regency. . . . **PERMANENT MIDNIGHT** (9/28/98): Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square. . . . **SAVING PRIVATE RYAN** (8/3/98): Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, Orpheum VII, State, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **UNMADE BEDS:** The Screening Room. . . . **URBAN LEGEND:** Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **WITHOUT LIMITS** (9/14/98): Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, 72nd Street East, and Village Theatre VII.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

(Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.)

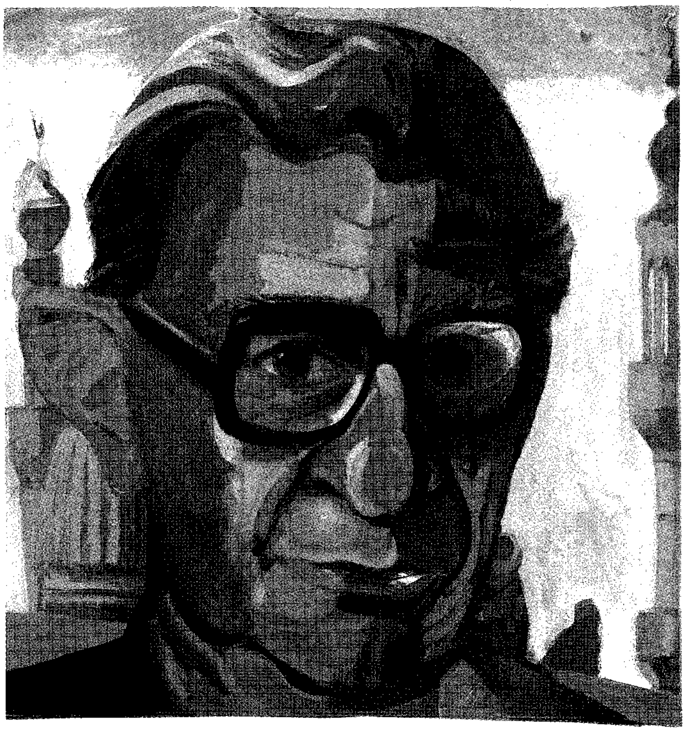
NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL—The annual festival of recent international films. Sept. 30 at 6 and Oct. 4 at 1:30: “The Apple” (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran and France). . . . Sept. 30 at 9 and Oct. 1 at 6: “My Name Is Joe” (Ken Loach, United Kingdom). . . . Oct. 1 at 9 and Oct. 3 at midnight: “Velvet Goldmine” (Todd Haynes, United States and United Kingdom). . . . Oct. 2 at 6 and Oct. 4 at 9:45: “A Tale of Autumn” (Eric Rohmer, France). . . . Oct. 2 at 9 and Oct. 3 at noon: “The General” (John Boorman, Republic of Ireland). . . . Oct. 3 at 3: “Point Blank” (Boorman, United States). . . . Oct. 3 at 6 and Oct. 4 at 7:15: “Slam” (Marc Levin, United States). . . . Oct. 3 at 8:45 and Oct. 4 at 4: “Black Cat, White Cat” (Emir Kusturica; Yugoslavia, Germany, and France). . . . Oct. 5 at 6 and Oct. 6 at 9: “The Flowers of Shanghai” (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan). . . . Oct. 5 at 9 and Oct. 6 at 6: “Late August, Early September” (Olivier Assayas, France). (Alice Tully Hall. For tickets, call 875-5050.)

FILM FORUM 2 AND 3, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—**THEATRE 2:** Through Oct. 1: “Me and My Brother” (1968; Robert Frank) and “Pull My Daisy” (1959, Alfred Leslie and Frank). . . . From Oct. 2 (except Oct. 5): “The Bicycle Thief” (1949, Vittorio De Sica; in Italian). . . . Oct. 5: “The Navigator” (1924, Buster Keaton; silent), “The Haunted House” (†), and two short films by and with Keaton. . . **THEATRE 3:** “Touch of Evil” (†).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—A program of films directed by Gordon Parks. Oct. 1 at 2:30 and Oct. 3 at 5: “The Learning Tree” (1969). . . . Oct. 1 at 6 and Oct. 2 at 2:30: “Shaft” (1971). . . . Oct. 2 at 6 and Oct. 4 at 2: “Solomon Northrup's Odyssey” (1985). . . . Oct. 2 at 8 and Oct. 3 at 2: “Leadbelly” (1976). . . . ¶ A program of films by G. W. Pabst. Oct. 5 at 6 and Oct. 6 at 2:30: “The Treasure” (1923, a German silent film) and “Secrets of a Soul” (1925, a German silent film). . . . Oct. 6 at 6: “The Joyless Street” (1925, a German silent film).

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE, 35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Films directed by John Huston. Oct. 3 at 2: “The Misfits” (1961). . . . Oct. 3 at 4:30: “Reflections in a Golden Eye” (1967). . . . Oct. 4 at 2: “Fat City” (1972). . . . Oct. 4 at 4: “The Man Who Would Be King” (1975).

WALTER READE THEATRE, Lincoln Center (875-5600)—A program of films by the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine; in Arabic, with English subtitles. Sept. 30 at 4, 6:30, and 9: “Cairo Station” (1958). . . . Oct. 2 at 4 and 7 and Oct. 3 at 2: “Saladin” (1963). . . . Oct. 4 at 5:45 and Oct. 5 at 6:30: “Once Upon a Time the Nile” (1970). . . . Oct. 4 at 7:50 and Oct. 5 at 4 and 8:30: “The Land” (1969). . . . Oct. 6 at 4 and 8:15:



At the Walter Reade, a retrospective of films by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine.

RICCARDO VECCHIO

"The Choice" (1970). . . . Oct. 6 at 6:15: "The Sparrow" (1973). . . . ¶ Oct. 1 at 7 and 9:30: "Strike" (†). . . . ¶ Oct. 3 at 6:15 and 8:30 and Oct. 4 at 1 and 3:20: "In the Presence of a Clown" (1997, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish).

Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (864-5400)—A program of films made by United Artists. Oct. 6 at 7: "Paths of Glory" (1958, Stanley Kubrick). . . . Oct. 6 at 8:45: "Apocalypse Now" (1979, Francis Ford Coppola).

A Different Light Bookstore, 151 W. 19th St.—A Sunday-night series of free films (and popcorn). On Oct. 4 at 7, the feature will be "The Birds" (1963, Alfred Hitchcock).

Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—Sept. 30 at 8: "Honeymoon" (1997, Dan Sallitt). . . . Oct. 2 at 8: "Brighton Rock" (1947, John Boulting) and "The Heart of the Matter" (1953, George More O'Ferrall). . . . Oct. 3 at 4 and 8: "Detour" (1945, Edgar Ulmer) and "Bluebeard" (1944, Ulmer). . . . Oct. 4 at 4 and 8: "The Chase" (1946, Arthur Ripley) and "The Blue Gardenia" (1953, Fritz Lang). . . . Oct. 4 at 7: "Dog Star Man" (1964, Stan Brakhage). . . . Oct. 6 at 7 and 9:45: "Inside/Out" (1997, Rob Tregenza).

Cantor Film Center, 36 E. 8th St.—Oct. 3, starting at 1: A program of short films, two feature-length films, and discussions by a group of independent filmmakers. (For information, call 501-4242.)

Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (355-6160)—A three-month retrospective of films featuring Catherine Deneuve. Oct. 6 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" (1964, Jacques Demy; in French).

THEATRE ADDRESSES

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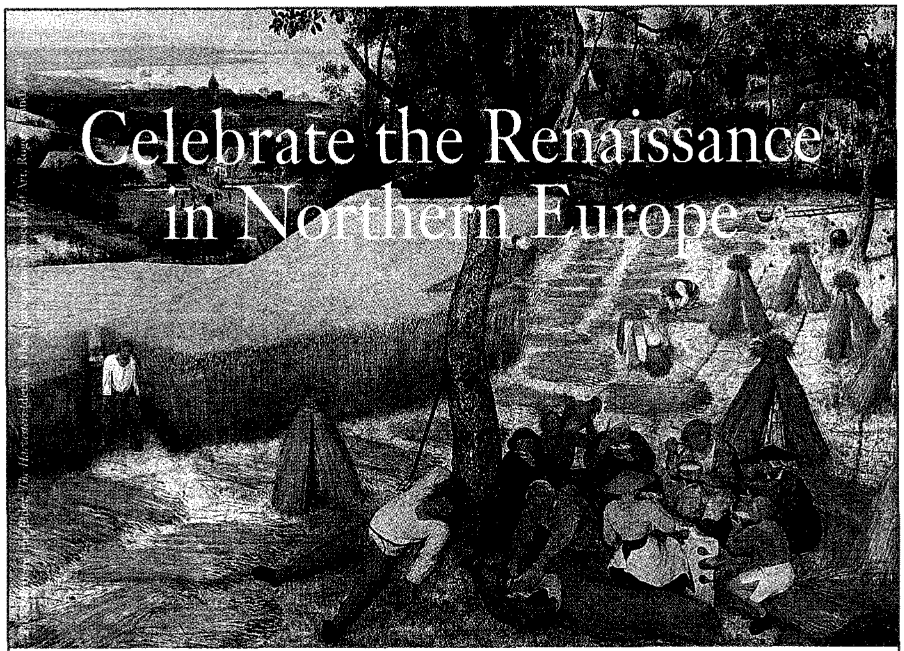
(For show times, call 777-FILM, except where noted.)

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
86th Street East Twin, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Embassy 1, 2, and 3, Seventh Ave. at 47th St.
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Guild, 33 W. 50th St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
Regency, Broadway at 67th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Showplace, 238 E. 34th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.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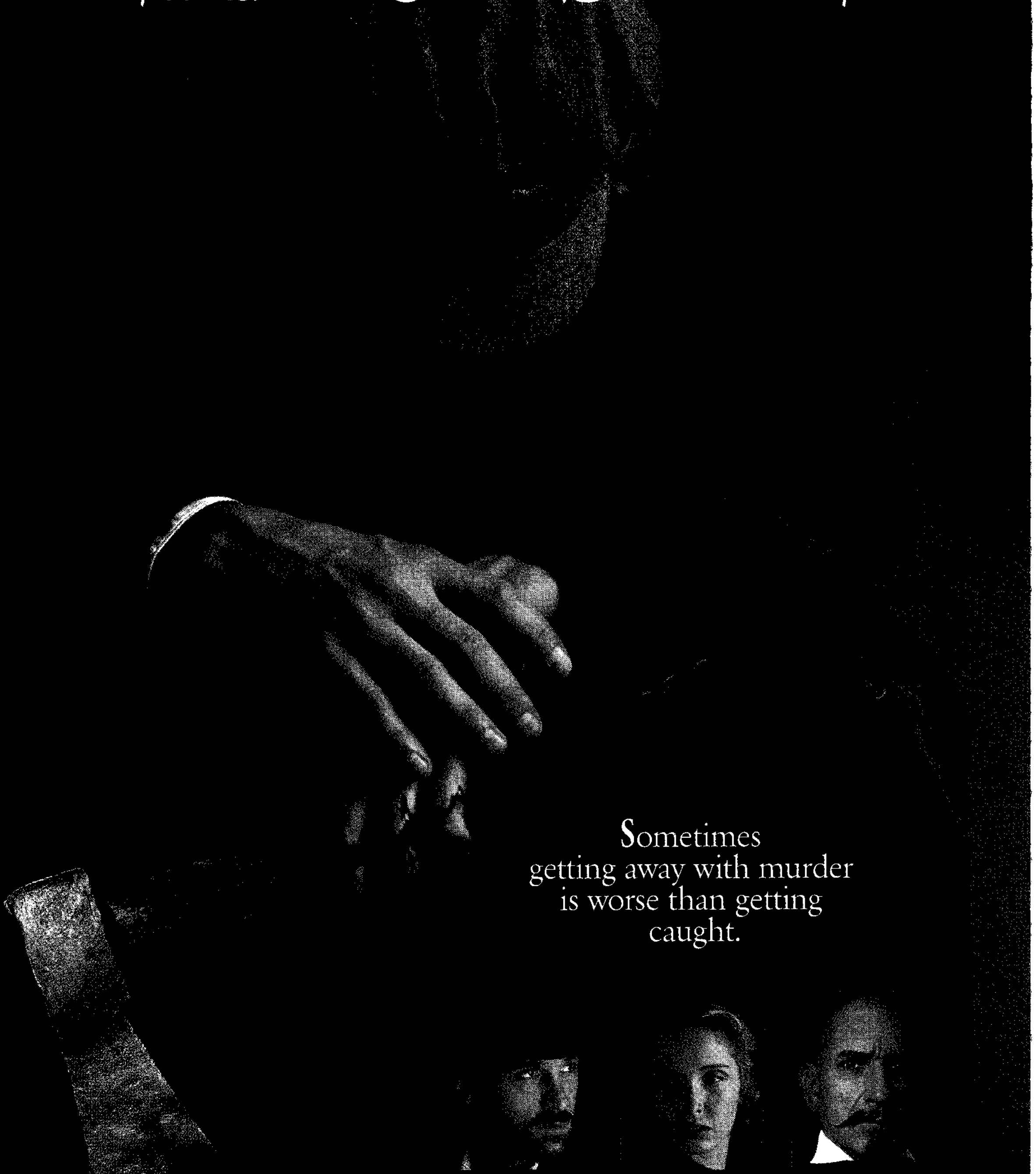
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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Thanks to the papers, we know what the columnists think. Thanks to round-the-clock cable, we know what the ex-prosecutors, the right-wing blondes, the teletropic law professors, and the disgraced political consultants think. Thanks to the polls, we know what "the American people" think. But what about the experts on human folly?

THIS summer, my plan was to do very selective radio listening, read no newspapers or news magazines, and leave my television screen profoundly, mercifully blank. There were books to read, others to finish, a few to read again. It was a lovely summer, and I was pleased with the decision to recuse myself from what had become since January The Only Story Worth Telling. Although I wanted cognitive space for my own pursuits, averting my gaze was not to bury my head. I was eager for information, yet suspicious of the package in which that information would be wrapped. I have been convinced for a long time now that, with a few dazzling exceptions, print and visual media have thrown away their freedom and chosen jail instead—have willingly locked themselves into a ratings-driven, money-based prison of their own making. However comfortable the prison may be, its most overwhelming feature is loss of the public. Not able, therefore, to trust reporters to report instead of gossip among themselves, unable to bear newscasters deflecting, ignoring, trivializing information—orchestrating its minor chords for the highest decibel—I decided to get my news the old-fashioned way: conversation, public eavesdropping, and word of mouth.

I hoped to avoid the spectacle I was sure would be mounted, fearing that at any minute I might have to witness ex-Presidential friends selling that friendship for the higher salaries of broadcast journalism; anticipating the nausea that might rise when quaking Democrats took firm positions on or over the fence in case the polls changed. I imagined feral Republicans, smelling blood and a shot at the totalitarian power they believe is rightfully theirs; self-congratulatory pundits sifting through "history" for nuggets of dubious relevancy.

I did not relinquish my summer plans, but summer is over now and I have begun to supplement verbal accounts of the running news with tentative perusal of C-SPAN, brief glimpses of anchorfolk, squinting glances at newspapers—trying belatedly to get the story straight. What, I have been wondering, is the story—the one only the public seems to know? And what does it mean?

Toni Morrison

I wish that the effluvia did add up to a story of adultery. Serious as adultery is, it is not a national catastrophe. Women leaving hotels following trysts with their extramarital lovers tell pollsters they abominate Mr. Clinton's behavior. Relaxed men fresh from massage parlors frown earnestly into the camera at the mere thought of such malfeasance. No one "approves" of adultery, but, unlike fidelity in Plymouth Rock society, late-twentieth-century fidelity, when weighed against the constitutional right to privacy, comes up short. The root of the word, *adulterare*, means "to defile," but at its core is treachery. Cloaked in deception and secrecy, it has earned prominence on lists of moral prohibitions and is understood as more than a sin; in divorce courts it is a crime. People don't get arrested for its commission, but they can suffer its grave consequences.

Still, it is clear that this is not a narrative of adultery or even of its consequences for the families involved. Is there anyone who believes that that was all the investigation had in mind? Adultery is the Independent Counsel's loss leader, the item displayed to lure the customers inside the shop. Nor was it ever a story about seduction—male vamp or female predator (or the other way around). It played that way a little: a worn tale of middle-aged vulnerability and youthful appetite. The Achilles' heel analogy flashed for a bit, but had no staying power, although its ultra meaning—that Achilles' heel was given to Achilles, not to a lesser man—lay quietly dormant under the cliché.

At another point, the story seemed to be about high and impeachable crimes like the ones we have had some experience with: the suborning of federal agencies; the exchange of billion-dollar contracts for proof of indiscretion; the extermination of infants in illegal wars mounted and waged for money and power. Until something like those abuses surfaces, the story will have to make do with thinner stuff: alleged perjury and "Lady, your husband is cheating on us." Whatever the media

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT RISKO

promote and the chorus chants, whatever dapples dinner tables, this is not a mundane story of sex, lies, and videotape. The real story is none of these. Not adultery, or high crimes. Nor is it even the story of a brilliant President naïve enough to believe, along with the rest of the citizenry, that there were lines one's enemies would not cross, lengths to which they would not go—a profound, perhaps irrevocable, error in judgment.

In a quite baffling and frustrating manner, it was not a "story" but a compilation of revelations and commentary which shied away from the meaning of its own material. In spite of myriad "titles" ("The President in Crisis"), what the public has been given is dangerously close to a story of no story at all. One of the problems in locating it is the absence of a coherent sphere of enunciation. There seems to be no appropriate language in which or platform of discourse from which to pursue it. This absence of clear language has imploded into a surfeit of contradictory languages. The parsing and equivocal terminology of law is laced with titillation. Raw comedy is spiked with Cotton Mather homilies. The precision of a coroner's vocabulary mocks passionate debates on morality. Radiant sermons are forced to dance with vile headlines. From deep within this conflagration of tony, occasionally insightful, arch, pompous, mournful, supercilious, generous, salivating verbalism, the single consistent sound to emerge is a howl of revulsion.

But revulsion against what? What is being violated, ruptured, defiled? The bedroom? The Oval Office? The voting booth? The fourth grade? Marriage vows? The flag? Whatever answer is given, underneath the national embarrassment churns a disquiet turned to dread and now anger.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN men seemed to understand it right away. Years ago, in the middle of the Whitewater investigation, one heard the first murmurs: white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas. And when virtually all the African-American Clinton appointees began, one by one, to disappear, when the President's body, his privacy, his unpoliced sexuality became the focus of the persecution, when he was metaphorically seized and body-searched, who could gainsay these black men who knew whereof they spoke? The message was clear: "No matter how smart you are, how hard you work, how much coin you earn for us, we will put you in your place or put you out of the place you have somehow, albeit with our permission, achieved. You will be fired from your job, sent away in disgrace, and—who knows?—maybe sentenced and jailed to boot. In short, unless you do as we say (i.e., assimilate at once), your expletives belong to us."

For a large segment of the population who are not African-Americans or members of other minorities, the elusive story left visible tracks: from target sighted to attack, to criminalization, to lynching, and now, in some quarters, to crucifixion. The always and already guilty "perp" is being hunted down not by a prosecutor's obsessive application of law but by a different kind of pursuer, one who makes new laws out of the shards of those he breaks.

Certain freedoms I once imagined as being in a vault somewhere, like ancient jewels kept safe from thieves. No single official or group could break in and remove them, certainly not in public. The image is juvenile, of course, and I have not had recourse to it for the whole of my adult life. Yet it is useful now to explain what I perceive as the real story. For each bootstep the office of the Independent Counsel has taken smashes one of those jewels—a ruby of grand-jury secrecy here, a sapphire of due process there. Such concentrated power may be reminiscent of a solitary Torquemada on a holy mission of lethal inquisition. It may even suggest a fatwa. But neither applies. This is Slaughtergate. A sustained, bloody, arrogant coup d'état. The Presidency is being stolen from us. And the people know it.

I don't regret my "news-free" summer. Getting at the story in that retrograde fashion has been rewarding. Early this week, a neighbor called to ask if I would march. Where? To Washington, she said. Absolutely, I answered, without even asking what for. "We have to prevent the collapse of our Constitution," she said.

We meet tonight.—TONI MORRISON

◆

AS recounted in the Starr report, the story of Bill Clinton's downfall, like that of Samson's, hinges on a moment of weary giving in to a woman's entreaties. In the Bible:

> [Delilah] said unto him, How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me? Thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth. And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; that he told her all.

Starr's version of the basic myth goes:

> "I stood up and I said . . . I care about you so much . . . I don't understand why you won't let me . . . make you come; it's important to me; I mean, it just doesn't feel complete, it doesn't seem right.". . . They looked at each other for a moment. Then, saying, "*I don't want to disappoint you,*" the President consented. . . .

Janet Malcolm

In his report, for reasons beyond comprehension, Kenneth Starr has chosen to portray the man he wishes to destroy not as the cold seducer and exploiter of youth and innocence but as the pitiable victim of a predatory female. Clinton emerges from the report as a genial sap who had the misfortune to meet a woman who would lure him to his ruin. Lewinsky chased him and caught him. He weakly succumbed to her tacky allurements. When, finally, he tried to break away from her, she would not loosen her grip. In both numbing and fascinating detail, the report retails the saga of Lewinsky's petulant demands that Clinton get her a job, first in the White House, then in New York, and not any old job but "one that she could obtain without much effort: 'I don't want to have to work for this position. . . . I just want it to be given to me.' " When she asked for a job at the U.N., Clinton meekly set to work getting one for her, but she changed her mind and "prodded the President to get her a job in the private sector." She wrote to him that "the most important things to me are that I am engaged and interested in my work, I am not someone's administrative/executive assistant, and my salary can provide me a comfortable living in New York."

Lewinsky emerges from the report as a piece of work. She is aggressive, self-involved, calculating, devious. (There is even a hint of blackmail: "Ms. Lewinsky also obliquely threatened to disclose their relationship. If she was not going to return to work at the White House, she wrote [to Clinton], then she would 'need to explain to my parents exactly why that wasn't happening.'") The relentless Lewinsky takes over the narrative. It is almost as if Starr had absently allowed some strain of deep-seated misogyny to derail his enterprise of driving the President out of office. He evidently did not realize that by giving his captive Valley Girl witness her head, and by allowing his contempt for her to show, he would let his prey escape with his life. It is the brash Monica, not the passive Bill, who finally earns the reader's censure. Since the object of the exercise was to turn the nation against the President, those of us who deplored the investigation from the start can only take satisfaction in Starr's bungling—in this time of few satisfactions. —JANET MALCOLM

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THE indiscretions of famous men are of great interest, though usually they remain footnotes. As has been made clear, however, it was not only the President's indiscretion but his deplorable attempt to conceal and deny it that was fatal. From this a crime was concocted. I think of the time-tested formula of the father of a friend of mine: In the event of wrongdoing, a manly confession and a pious resolve. It might have been hoped that President Clinton would, when faced with the accusation, immediately come out with the whole truth. If he had been a member of the Grand Old Party—like Nixon, or Reagan, for that matter—he would surely have had the requisite moral fibre.

There are lies that presumably cause one to be descended into Hell and lesser, even trivial, ones that cannot be judged as harshly and are often, in fact, a necessity. The President's quibblings and, in some cases, untruths were meant to keep his private and entirely legal behavior from being revealed. They were to save his reputation and to prevent considerable injury to Mrs. Clinton and their daughter.

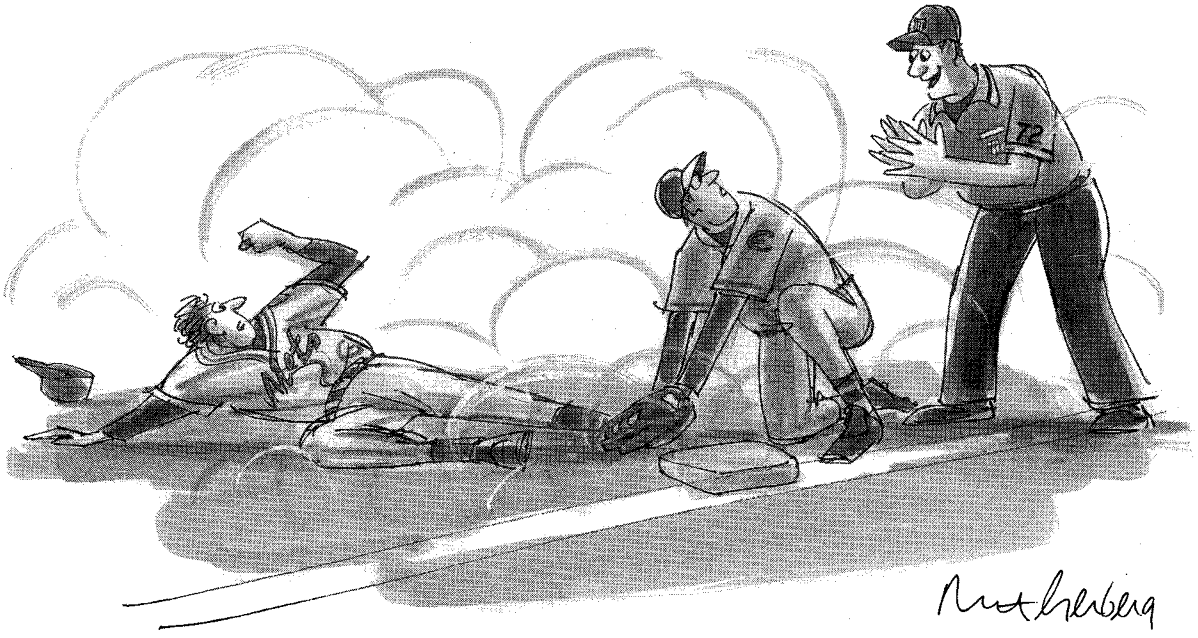
Still, there remains the awful fact of what happened in the White House. The acts were certainly unexampled. They amounted to evidence of an illness, and Starr and his loyal associates did what they could for the good of the country and the furtherance of justice. Never mind that the country, and its leadership, was already good. As for justice, we know quite well from the Simpson case that it will always eventually triumph.

I recall a foreshadowing in a play of Wallace Shawn's some years ago, "Aunt Dan and Lemon." In it the young protagonist imagines herself meeting Henry Kissinger. She would be fully prepared, she says, to be Kissinger's personal slave, something she feels he would like. He could have his pleasure of her with nothing in the way of preliminaries; she knows how busy he is—an exchange of glances would do. "He served humanity. I would serve him," she fantasizes. It is unsettling to have such thoughts committed to paper, not to speak of spoken aloud on the stage.

James Salter

Jack Kennedy's moral strength, which was part of his immense appeal, was later found to be flawed. Before these revelations, he had set in motion huge undertakings—the flight to the moon, for instance. Had it been known how hollow he actually was, perhaps Oswald would not have been impelled to shoot him—it could have been expected that he would collapse of his own accord.

I was never a great admirer of Clinton. I felt that he had somehow failed to measure up: that it was all right to duck out of fighting in a war, but if you sneaked away from fighting you should not seek to be Commander-in-Chief. Perhaps these things are no longer that closely related. In any case, today, as he is being unmercifully flayed by men undoubtedly finer but a bit less generous, I am changing my opinion. I am impressed by his grit and unfaltering dedi-



"Well executed, both of you!"

cation to the duties for which he was twice elected. If he is also shameless, he is not alone in this. There is no real beauty without some slight imperfection.
—James Salter

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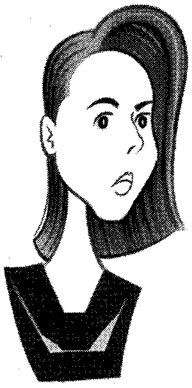
OH, the autoimmune disorder that is the Starr-Clinton-Lewinsky matter. Inadequate foes—or somehow unimpressive ones—have our government geared up and attacking itself. We are paralyzed—and thrilled in that sickened sort of way. Terrorists can't bomb the scandal away; planes and stock markets can't crash it away; JonBenét Ramsey and Neil LaBute can't frighten it away. As was said in Chicago in 1968, "The whole world is watching"—while we collapse into our wheelchair (parked in front of CNN) and have our nervous breakdown.


Lorrie Moore

Full disclosure: I find Linda Tripp's moral position intriguing and literary. I believe Paula Jones was degraded by her boss, probably illegally so. And I did not vote for Bill Clinton. (Though now I feel sorry for him, in the same way I felt sorry for Pee-wee Herman when he was arrested in that Florida movie theatre.) I voted in various primaries and elections for Jesse Jackson, Jerry Brown, and Ralph Nader. Clinton, in office, has been dismaying in predictable ways: his centrist judiciary appointments, his botched national health plan, his gays-in-the-military debacle, his generally compromised or meretricious or dithering policymaking. I have mostly thought that he was a charming shark, a user, a yuppie, a bad actor, and a sexy, lying fool. This he has in common with many people (perhaps even poor Pee-wee Herman).

Still, at no point in his life did Bill Clinton ever say, "I am not a sex addict." Those who voted for him knew something of his unfortunate and compulsive personal life and decided they didn't care. Now, suddenly, voters care? (I don't think so.) Now, suddenly, Congress is shocked? Where are the true and the brave? Now, suddenly, congressional Democrats (and the First Lady herself) are feigning sad or angry surprise in order to effect a kind of independence from this guy and keep their pathetically unproductive jobs. Is the paycheck really *that* good?

Surely there are many reasons that the Lewinsky affair has taken over our national conversation.

(1) The political emptiness of the Clinton White House. Both nature and political theatre abhor a vacuum: caught in a kind of Beckettian holding pattern, the Clinton Presidency got overtaken by a sex comedy more popular with the summer-stock crowd.

(2) The fudged look of the Clinton marriage. We gaze upon the First Family the way children would—imagining we are part of it, always feeling on behalf of Chelsea and wondering what the heck Mom and Dad are up to. Yet Bill and Hillary's weird unhappiness repels us. Weird unhappiness is never as attractive as weird fun. And what is even more interesting is weird fun paid for with union support, Cabinet trust, grand-jury testimony, public humiliation, and impeachment talk.

3) Finally, there is the strange, not-to-be-thwarted character of Ken Starr, future *Time* Man of the Year. (And where is the stuff about the land deal, Mr. Starr?) That our ungentlemanly President's gentlemanly failure to kiss and tell should be subjected to the legalisms of judiciary procedure is, of course, total madness, a torture and a regicide, which could only have been brought about by Starr, the crazed zealot the right wing didn't even know it had. He is, of course, Victor Hugo's Javert. But he has not pursued Jean Valjean. In fact, in a bit of publicly funded intertextual surrealism (and downsized literary ambition), he has leaped completely out of the book and pursued Terry Southern's Candy.

For this we pay taxes. Dear God, bring back the N.E.A. —Lorrie Moore

•

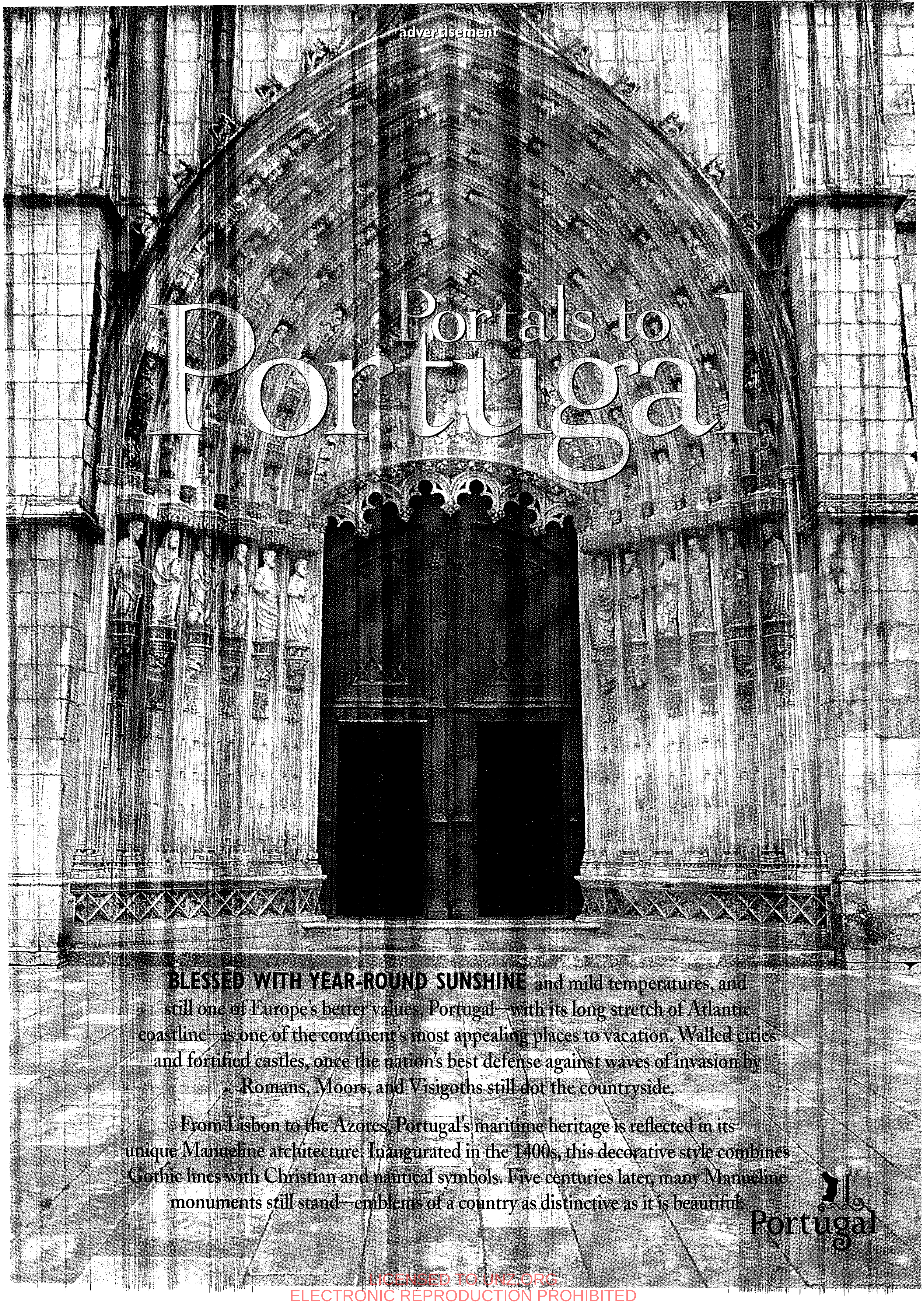
AT the end of last May, months before Kenneth Starr loosed his report on Congress and the nation, I sent to an elderly and eminent writer who has honored me by his friendship the bound galleys of my most recent novel. Less than a week later, I received a letter in return. Tucked into a paragraph that began with winsome praise for the book came the dreaded zinger. He objected to the increasing role that sex seemed to play in my fiction, to the thought I had put into the mind of my dying protagonist: "More than ever, it's clear to him that fucking is the force that drives the world." The next day, I replied to my grand friend, writing, "I give sex a prominent and not always pleasant place because it is so terrifyingly strong in directing people's lives. Stronger than greed and ambition: just think, if you can bear it, of President Clinton."

I take it as an unshakable postulate that for many men (though by no means for all) the abject availability of a woman makes her irresistible—the man's *goût de la boue* locks in. From then on, when she's at hand, ready to be used however the man wants, it's easier to separate two dogs in an alley than to keep him off her. The President was a lost man, and naïve to boot. Somewhere in the back of his head he must have the idea that you can trust little sluts. In fact, only great ladies and high-priced whores know how to keep secrets.

The sexual act is beautiful only to those who perform it. For a voyeur, it is pornography, subject matter for viewing booths in seedy arcades or movies that business travellers watch in airport hotel beds and charge to their employers. To the everlasting shame of the members of Congress who voted to publish the Starr report and to release the tape of the President's testimony, they have turned us into a nation of Peeping Toms. One thought that public executions and floggings, putting sinners in stocks, shaving the heads of adulteresses, and similar pastimes that have beguiled the multitude ever since our ancestors evolved into the human species had all gone out of style in the industrialized democracies. When they occur in less privileged places—in China, for instance, where during the Cultural Revolution public confessions of guilt and acts of contrition were de rigueur—Amnesty International raises a mighty clamor.

Louis Begley

In the dim, bloodstained past of certain cultures, sacrifices of kings were holy acts, performed by priests to obtain for the king's subjects a great benefit—averting a famine or a plague. Something akin to those rites, but obscenely profane, has been acted out in Washington. The an-



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Portals to Portugal

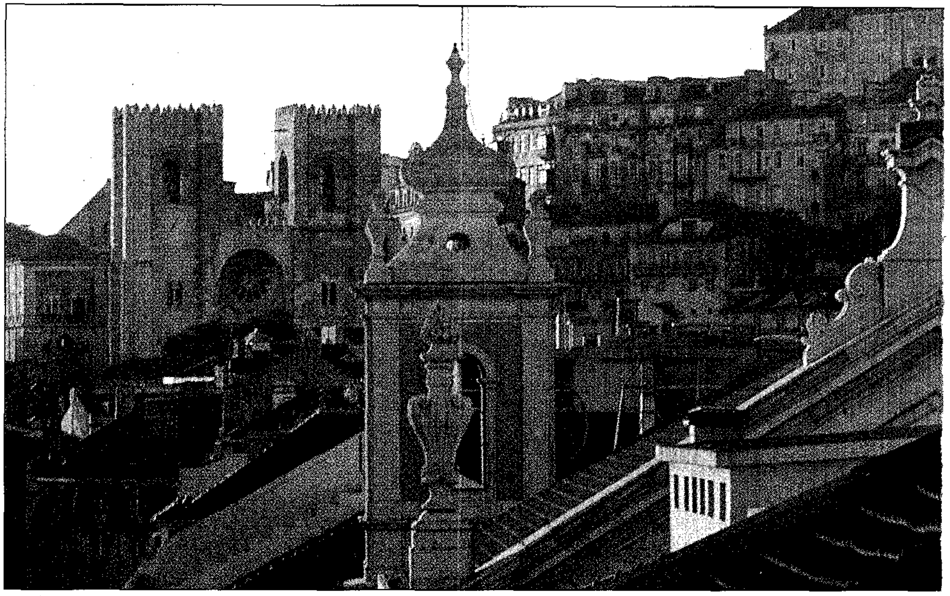
BLESSED WITH YEAR-ROUND SUNSHINE and mild temperatures, and still one of Europe's better values, Portugal—with its long stretch of Atlantic coastline—is one of the continent's most appealing places to vacation. Walled cities and fortified castles, once the nation's best defense against waves of invasion by Romans, Moors, and Visigoths still dot the countryside.

From Lisbon to the Azores, Portugal's maritime heritage is reflected in its unique Manueline architecture. Inaugurated in the 1400s, this decorative style combines Gothic lines with Christian and nautical symbols. Five centuries later, many Manueline monuments still stand—emblems of a country as distinctive as it is beautiful.

Portugal

Unique Retreats

For those who have always wanted to spend a night in a castle, Pousada do Castelo in Óbidos north of Lisbon, a former fifteenth-century summer retreat of the Portuguese court, today welcomes guests. A number of former palaces, monasteries, and historic manor houses have been converted to *pousadas*, a network of lovingly restored hotel establishments operated by the government. Enchanted mementos of history, each reflects the culture, art, and customs of the region it graces.



The Sé Cathedral figures prominently among the rooftops of Lisbon credit: Antonio Sacchetti

Lisbon Legacies

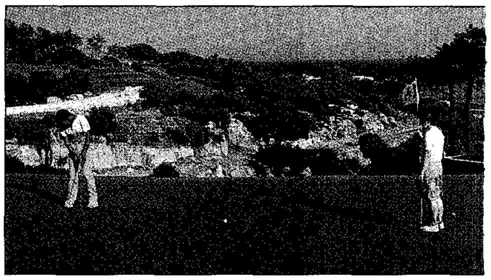
Those who appreciate diversity will find Lisbon an engaging combination of ancient and new. In the shadow of skyscrapers, buildings with colorful, tile-covered facades line narrow, winding streets. A national art form, these hand-painted *azulejos* (glazed ceramic tiles) brighten countless structures inside and out. The Sé Cathedral, built by Portugal's first king in 1150; the National Museum of Ancient Art; and the Museum of Decorative Arts, housed in a seventeenth-century palace, are other must-sees.

Lisbon also buzzes with modern activity—great shopping, vibrant nightlife, ultramodern hotels. Shoppers can find a bounty here: Visitors can fill suitcases with handmade treasures: *azulejos*, carpets, tapestries, embroidered lace, table linens, silk bedspreads, leather goods, musical instruments, painted pottery, silver, and gold-filigree jewelry. Regional wines, ranging from fresh *vinhos verdes* to aged ports, make memorable souvenirs as well.

The recently ended Expo '98, the last World's Fair of the twentieth century, left Lisbon well-prepared for the millennium. Improved infrastructure, waterfront redevelopment, and a new central transportation hub were developed as part of the city's ongoing urban revival. Expo '98 also leaves behind the Lisbon Oceanarium, whose main exhibition recreates the planet's five oceanic regions and holds an immense central tank with thousands of aquatic species.

Golf, Anyone?

Sweeping views, a perennial spring-like climate, and the velvety greens of championship courses make any day a great one to set out for one of Portugal's links. Just beyond Lisbon, golfers are drawn to the Estoril Coast with the region's spectacular courses: Majestic Quinta da Marinha, designed by Robert Trent Jones, stretches to Guincho Beach; on its thirteenth hole golfers have an entire sweep of the Atlantic as a backdrop. Nearby Tróia, considered the country's toughest course, is laid out across a peninsula surrounded by beaches. The Arrábida mountains in the distance tempt all but the most fanatical players to take their eye off the ball.



The back nine at the Quinta da Marinha overlooking Guincho Beach credit: Michael Gedye

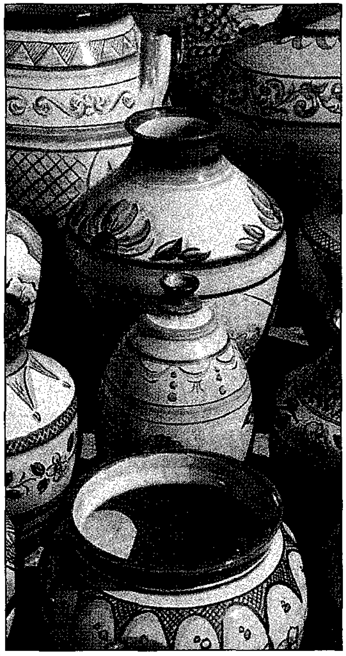
A Trip Back in Time

The area north of Lisbon, boasts its own "Jurassic Park," where a 140-million-year-old dinosaur embryo was recently discovered. Museums exhibit vestiges of Stone Age civilization and an excavation of a lavish Roman summer resort. South of Lisbon, The Alentejo's vast inland plains hold Roman ruins and fortified castles inside medieval walled cities.

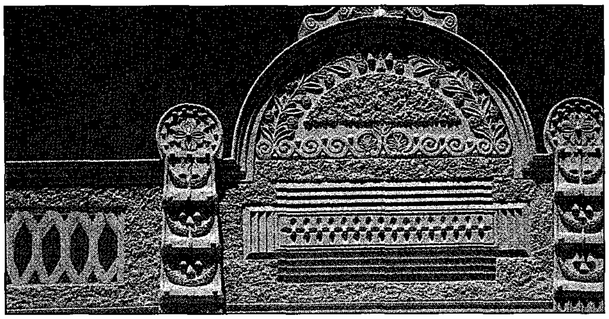
There are traces of Jewish life in Portugal that date back to the fifth century. Portugal's Jews were physicians, astronomers, cartographers, and tax collectors; they comprised an intellectual and economic elite.

Visitors interested in Portugal's Jewish history can tour a museum in Tomar that was once a fourteenth-century synagogue. Or they can stop in Évora, one of the loveliest towns in Portugal, to see Hebrew manuscripts in the Public Library and Jewish artifacts at the Regional Museum. Faro, a fifteenth-century center of Jewish printing, has two Jewish cemeteries dating from the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Cover: The Batalha Monastery north of Lisbon; below: hand-painted artesanato
courtesy of the Portuguese Trade Commission



Left: Sidestreets of Óbidos credit: José Manuel; *below: Moorish facade of Mitica in Algarve* credit: João Paulo



Beach and Island Havens

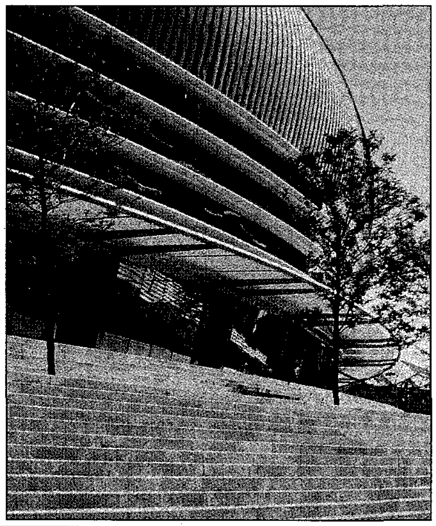
Travelers in search of warm seas, soft sands, and brilliant sun often head for the Algarve, about one hundred miles of shoreline along the country's southernmost tip. The region's magnificent beaches are interspersed with dramatic caves, cliffs, and grottos. Like any seaside destination, the Algarve keeps visitors busy with a full complement of outdoor sports and activities.

West of Morocco, Portugal's Island of Madeira is one of Europe's oldest tourist destinations. Yet the beaches at Porto Santo, dotted with palm trees, remain nearly as pristine as when Christopher Columbus himself repaired there. Mangoes, passion fruit, bananas, and melons mellow into ripeness. Combined with fresh catches from the Atlantic and Madeira's famous wines, the dining is delectable.

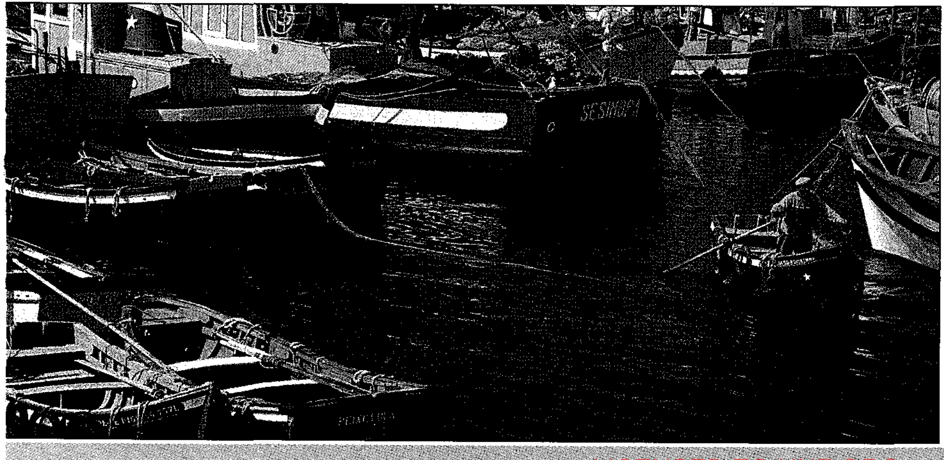
Lushness personified, the Azores to the northwest is a four-hundred-mile-long archipelago. Travelers who hop a two-hour flight from Lisbon can whale watch, sail, deep-sea fish, bicycle, snorkel, or golf at Terceira or São Miguel the same day. Others will exhilarate in the paradisiacal views: sapphire lakes formed by volcanic craters and deep gorges with gushing waterfalls. Wild azaleas and hydrangeas cascade down green-carpeted hillsides to the water's edge, where fortunate vacationers swim in sandy coves and natural pools.

Where should you begin your Portuguese adventure? Beaches, mountain ranges, scenic fishing villages, a medieval yet modern capital, towns shaped by eight hundred and fifty years of history, and genuinely friendly faces all await modern day explorers.

Expo's former Utopia Pavilion gets a second life as Lisbon's new Conference Center
credit: José Manuel



Azulejos richly adorn Lisbon edifice
credit: José Manuel; *below: colorful fishing boats dot the Portuguese coastline*



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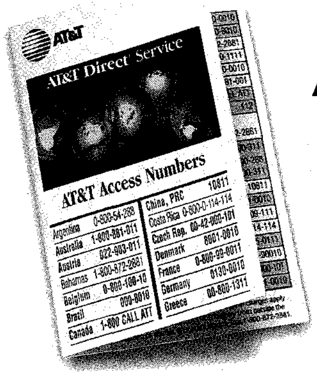

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cient barbaric horror flashed for all to see in the smirk on Sam Donaldson's face. Starr, high priest manqué, has not exposed or prevented any threat to the state. Instead, he has managed, laboriously and ghoulishly, to catch the President with his pants down. Then he invited the whole world to have a good look. I do not think the show he has staged will bring the nation a good harvest. —Louis Begley

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Rumor has it that Clinton won't survive this one, and maybe he won't. If he doesn't, I'll be sorry. I don't think Clinton has been a great President, but he has schlepped his Presidency through more dispiriting personal turmoil than anyone before him, and that shows lots of energy and endurance, which I respect. What I do believe about Bill Clinton is that, more than most recent Presidents, with the possible exception of Jimmy Carter, he knows the difference between love and war. He much prefers the former to the latter, and always has. You can't say that for all of them.

Jane Smiley

Take John Kennedy, for example, who had considerable experience of both love and war. When I look back on the Cuban missile crisis, which took place when I was in eighth grade, I find myself beyond astonishment that a responsible man put my innocent life at risk of nuclear destruction. Everyone around me was saying, "Better dead than Red." Really?

Or take my personal bête noir, George Bush. For most citizens, George Bush was not much more than a nonentity. Not me. What I remember about Bush is that the only time in his whole Presidency that he got a little animated was when he went to war against Iraq. His façade of Eastern-establishment savoir-faire slipped, and there he was, a guy for whom launching a missile seemed to be better than sex.

No one has ever accused Bill Clinton of being a fighter, not a lover. In some circles, his predilection is viewed with disfavor, but, in fact, he has shown a couple of times that he can strike if he has to, as in Sudan or Afghanistan, or hold off if striking decisively seems impossible, as in Bosnia. What is clear about Bill Clinton is that he has a firm grasp of the fact that love is love and war is war, and never the twain should be mixed up in the mind of the man with his finger on the button. War always brings Bill Clinton to a state of deep reluctance rather than a state of secret thrill. Love seems to have a different effect. Love seems to turn him on.

What could possibly be wrong with this? Those who are turned on by war make war even where it is inappropriate—let's say upon drug-takers, poor people, illegal immigrants, child gangs, strikers, and other domestic groups who might be better handled with love, understanding, and inclusion in the social fabric. Those who mistake love and war tend to believe that you can hurt people, or even kill them, and save them at the same time. They are great omelette makers who don't mind, and even rather like, breaking a few eggs.

Maybe what Clinton did in the Oval Office was love, or infatuation, or just sex. At the very least, it was a desire to make a connection with another person, a habitual desire for which Clinton is well known, and sometimes ridiculed. But this desire to connect is something I trust, maybe the one thing about him that I trust, because it seems to be the one thing that he can't get rid of. If we as a nation choose to put ourselves through the national pain of impeachment rather than the national healing of forgiveness, we will have only ourselves to blame when the next fellow comes along who would rather launch an air strike than a pass. —Jane Smiley

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Let us speak for a moment about *character*, because character seems to be the barely healed wound at which the Clinton-haters are once again picking (and also because it is the subject of perhaps the only public debate in which a novelist might purport to know something).

Character to me is not synonymous with adherence to a code of conduct. On the contrary, character in the current case has everything to do with being what is called in Yiddish a *mensch*—roughly translated, a *man*, in the best sense of the word. It is a word that, in my family at least, implied not only strength, as one might expect, but also gentleness, as one might not, and along with gentleness the virtues of learnedness, including flexibility of mind and the capacity to experience deep emotion, both in life and in art. A necessity of mensch-hood, as I understood it growing up, was wisdom, which might be thought of as a tempered intelligence—that is, a softening of moral rigidity, of Biblical proscription—drawn from the glories and failures of a full life. (Humor, of course, was the great evidence of wisdom.) It seems to me that Bill Clinton, though flawed perhaps, possesses a tempered intelligence. He is comfortable with the extremes of human possibility, with the grandness and loathsomeness of mankind, with the Icarian dream and petty stumble that is human character. It is this comfort, in fact, which might lead a man of his constitution to stray from what in some circles is thought of as morality.

But does this mean that he lacks character? On the contrary; to my mind it is only more evidence that he possesses it. That is, he possesses a complexity of bearing, an openness of spirit, and a fullness of experience that allow him to embrace high ideals and at the same time to permit trespasses against convention. And it is this tolerance for ambiguity within the self that distinguishes Mr. Clinton from his accuser. Character in fiction is on the surface perhaps different from what is called character in Presidential politics. But my point is that in my own idea of a leader they are similar. In a novel, I am interested in complex personality, in ranging intelligence, in moral originality—what in fiction is called *rounded* character. This is also what I want in the President of my country. Ken Starr's zealous and chillingly unambiguous morality, on the other hand, suggests to me none of the fullness, none of the complex interplay and recognition of opposing forces that interest the intelligent mind. And this, in fiction, is called *flat* character. If Bill Clinton and Ken Starr were characters in one of my students' stories, the class would agree that it is Mr. Starr, not Mr. Clinton, who lacks character. —Ethan Canin

Ethan Canin

(*To be continued next week.*)

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DIZZY DAYS

Hour by hour, a nation's capital goes out of its mind.

BY JOE KLEIN

ISTVAN BANYAI

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14TH

NEW YORK. A white tent has been pitched, incongruously, on East Sixty-eighth Street, guarding the entrance to the Council on Foreign Relations' august clubhouse, where the President of the United States is about to deliver an address on the global economy. Those of us who enjoy the blissfully exalted, and somewhat mildewed, distinction of being council members have been asked to arrive an hour early, and so I take my place in line, behind A. M. Rosenthal, formerly the executive editor of the New York *Times* and now a columnist for it.

This morning, three days after the release of the Starr report, the *Times* ran twenty news stories about Lewinskiana, four Op-Ed pieces, and an editorial filled with Olympian disdain for the philandering President. A few weeks ago, preparing to accompany Bill Clinton to Moscow, I looked at the *Times'* coverage of Richard Nixon's trip to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1974, about a month before he resigned from office. There was plenty of Watergate coverage in the paper, but it was cordoned off from the raft of news stories and analyses and Op-Ed pieces about the summit, which were entirely respectful; they contained only a few stray mentions of Watergate (and only one direct reference, in an analysis by Hedrick Smith, to the scandal's impact on Nixon's ability to negotiate with the Soviets). As we stand in line, I ask Rosenthal if the decorous 1974 coverage was a matter of editorial policy or was just the way things were in those days when the President travelled overseas (even as the office was occupied by a certifiable crook, his "smoking gun" tape under subpoena and an impeachment vote looming).

"It wasn't a conspiracy," Rosenthal answers quickly, and perhaps defensively. "Everyone makes his own decisions in a situation like that."

But doesn't he think it's interesting that all those different *Times* writers and analysts and columnists made the same, restrained decision?

"I suppose," he says, and we split off into adjacent and very similar conversations. Clinton will probably survive this, council members are saying, but it will be ugly, and exhausting, and debilitating—especially at a time when The Country Needs Leadership.

Members of the council tend to say Things Like That. And the crowd today, when gathered inside, is the council at its most splendiferous—the sort of luminaries who drop by only when a foreign celebrity like Fidel Castro or Boris Yeltsin is visiting. The room is heavy with bankers (ranging from David Rockefeller on down to mere decamillionaires) and banker diplomats like Richard Holbrooke. Studded amid the real money, sparkling like precious jewels, are famous journalists: Tom Brokaw is sitting right behind me, Walter Isaacson—the managing editor of *Time*—is just in front, Diane Sawyer two rows up, Barbara Walters over to the side. And every last conversation in the room, as we wait for the President to arrive, is about the same thing. Some of the conversations are remarkably explicit; others are more stately. Three people say to me, at various moments, "You wonder how he can survive the *embarrassment*." This is the riff du jour, plus the prediction that Clinton will be censured by Congress.

A few minutes before the President appears, a "tight pool" of White House reporters is ushered into the back of the room. Very unusual, this. Council events are usually off the record (although I've never heard a speaker use this license to say anything remotely controversial). Sam Donaldson immediately makes his presence felt in the rear of the room, blowing kisses to his colleague Sawyer and ragging Brokaw, "See, she's three rows ahead of you!"

Then the President arrives, rather unceremoniously, trailed by the First Lady and by Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, who has celestial status in these precincts. If *he* ever abandoned Clinton, the censurers in the audience would turn into an unkempt mob, howling for the President's resignation.

Clinton's speech about the global economy is solid, if uninspired. But it is fluid, and intelligent. Clinton's ability to grasp complicated, technical stuff remains, almost six years into his Presidency, something of a miracle to this crowd. "He's very smart," a banker whispers to me. "It's such a shame."

Afterward, the President comes down one aisle shaking hands; the First Lady proceeds down another. Above the din, David Bloom, of NBC, shouts a question about censure at the President; Bloom is smiling as he calls it out, knowing his fate—utter scorn from the crowd—in advance. But it's his job. He tries twice. "Be quiet!" one dignitary says. "Sh-h-h!" says another. Others turn and make faces, as if Bloom had been audibly flatulent.

Indeed, the mood of the audience has shifted some. There are no smoking-gun jokes anymore. There are remorseful "It's such a shame" conversations and more than a few discussions about the President's topic, the global economy. Clinton has won the day, subtly.

I wander over to Mrs. Clinton, who is explaining one of the President's proposals—to bolster the social safety net in Asia—to several women members of humanitarian organizations. She is doing this fervently, as she always

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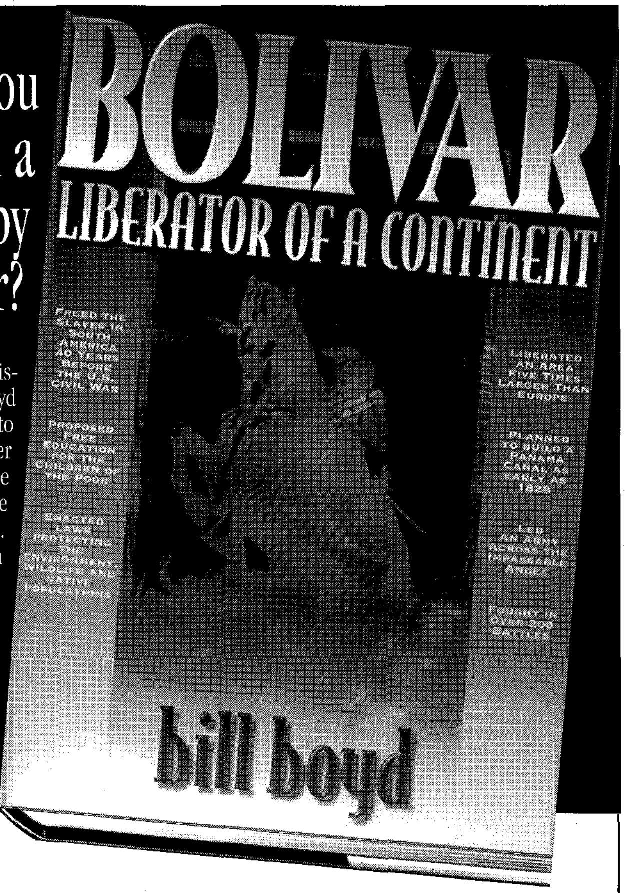
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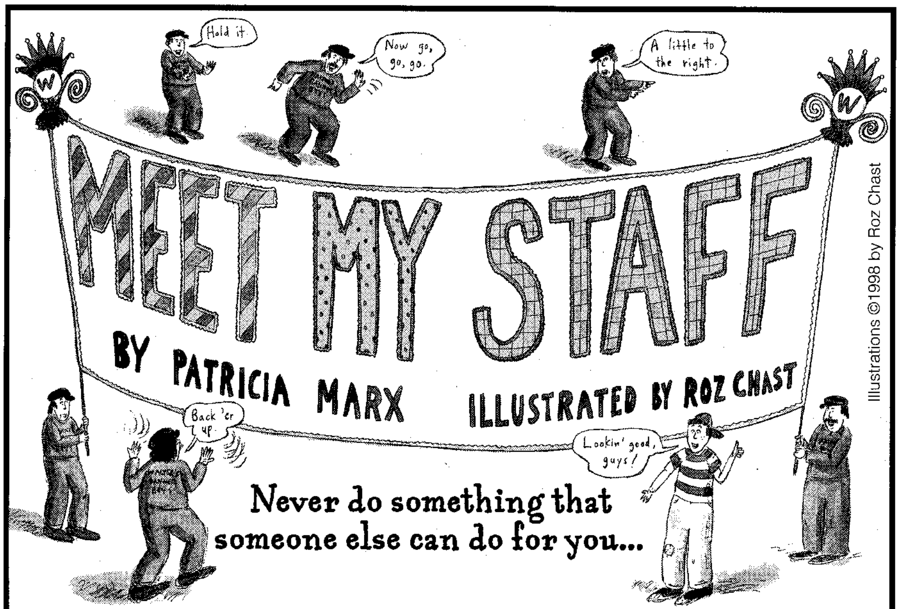
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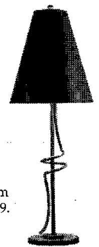

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does; her interest in these sorts of issues has been her life raft since the humiliating failure of her health-insurance initiative, in 1994. She appears to be utterly relieved to be discussing them now. Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, a respectful throng has gathered around the President. Sam Donaldson is standing on the outer edge. I ask him what they are talking about. "Russia," he says, with a scowl. "What was the First Lady talking about?"

"China."

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16TH

WASHINGTON. What a nuthouse! I had planned to attend Clinton's press conference with the Czech President, Vaclav Havel, but decided instead to watch it, as most people will, on TV. Immediately, I am plunged into the hectic claustrophobia at the heart of the scandal. Throughout Washington at this very moment, I realize, people are doing exactly what I'm doing—clicking back and forth between CNN and MSNBC. It has become a custom here: one or another of the all-news networks flickers unrelentingly in every congressional office, in the headquarters of every newspaper and magazine, and in more than a few saloons. The constant stimulus of portentous music and "Breaking News" and hosts and guests shouting at each other creates a cultural environment in the nation's capital at variance with that of the rest of the country; the city is aquiver with a sense of someone's impending doom.

The networks are laying on the doom pretty thick this afternoon. There is a synergistic commingling of political panic and journalistic hyperventilation. The release of the President's taped testimony is said to be imminent. Maybe as early as Friday. It will be "a bombshell," we are told. Meanwhile, the Internet magazine *Salon* has released a story that most of the rest of the press—in an inexplicable spasm of responsible behavior—had passed on: Congressman Henry Hyde, the Judiciary Committee chairman, had an affair in the nineteen-sixties. "Ugly times call for ugly tactics," *Salon's* editorial explains, creating an instant epitaph for an era. (Of course, *Salon's* breach of taste makes it possible for every other news agency to jump all over the story—

ABC leads the evening news with it.)

The hour before Clinton's press conference is wild. Democrats are suddenly abandoning their President. CNN runs tape of Representative Jim Moran, of Virginia, a leader of the moderate Democrats, who should be one of the President's best friends in Congress. Moran says, "There is some hemorrhaging going on within the Democratic Party.... The President has to come up with a way, in my opinion, to stop this." What sort of way? "I'm just not creative enough to think of a way other than resignation," Moran says. "But maybe he can."

Just before the press conference begins, Jeanne Meserve, of CNN, solemnly asks Jeff Greenfield, "Is this a *do-or-die* moment for the President?"

Greenfield pauses, then gives a wry smile. "No," he says. Few of his colleagues would be able to muster the courage to admit an absence of import.

The President seems absolutely unruffled and, well, Presidential with Havel. He handles the questions from the press about Lewinsky calmly. But it means nothing. Washington is on fire. The White House is in crisis. We are in uncharted waters. Impeachment is inevitable. I am giddy with clichés. The timpani clarion of CNN's "Inside Politics" is rattling around my brain. Bom, ba-bom, bom-ba-bom. I cancel dinner with friends, go back to the hotel, swallow a sleeping pill, and, long before "Nightline," am fast asleep.

The next day's Washington *Post* has an astonishing editorial, proposing that "invoking the majesty of the impeachment clause against behavior as trashy as this is somehow to cheapen the clause"—in other words, the President lacks the stature to be impeached. This is now the riff du jour: Why doesn't he have the class to resign?

Monday, September 21st

New York. Again, I pass up the opportunity to do something actual—that is, go to a conference on democracy and the global economy at New York University, to be attended by the Clintons and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, among others—and stick around the office to watch TV. I turn on CNN at 9:25 A.M. A giant thumb fills the screen. The thumb belongs to a technician who will press the button that will start the machine that will roll the tapes. This is, obviously, the moment of moments—the apogee of the scandal. We're about to see what Bill Clinton is really like. Over the past week, there's been a gathering drumbeat—almost as maddening as the "Inside Politics" timpani music—of received wisdom: the tapes will spell disaster for the President; there are "reports" that he'll turn purple, screech like a banshee, and storm out of the room.

But there he is on the screen, and he doesn't turn purple. On my television, he seems sort of salmon pink, with several shiny patches of sweat on his forehead; aside from that, he is the same Bill Clinton we've always seen in public—which is to say, charming, mesmerizing, and wicked smart. I watch in amazement as the President makes one of the more improbable arguments in the history of human sexuality—that oral sex isn't, really—and sort of gets away with it. He is at once gallant and brutal about Lewinsky; he is credibly remorseful about his actions; he is appropriately indignant about the motives of the prosecutorial army that has been pursuing him; his decision not to discuss sexual details seems eminently rational.

The testimony is a rare and unexpected event: it is subtle, complicated, enigmatic, slow-moving—by its very pace, it defies hyperbole and tamps down the scandal. When the cable-news networks resume their patter, in midafternoon, there is an oddly subdued air to it. A new set of clichés is laboriously wheeled into place: The sky isn't falling. A boil has been lanced. Air has been let out of the prosecutorial balloon. The fever is abating. Bom, ba-bom, bom-ba-bom. The Republicans look bewildered: the President may be mortally slick, they admit, but he's still a liar. At the White House press briefing, a few hours after the tape has been aired, Mike McCurry is asked, "Can the President use something like this"—the release of his testimony—"to turn it around and perhaps pull in some support?"

McCurry smiles. "I don't know how you use a day like today to rally support," he says.

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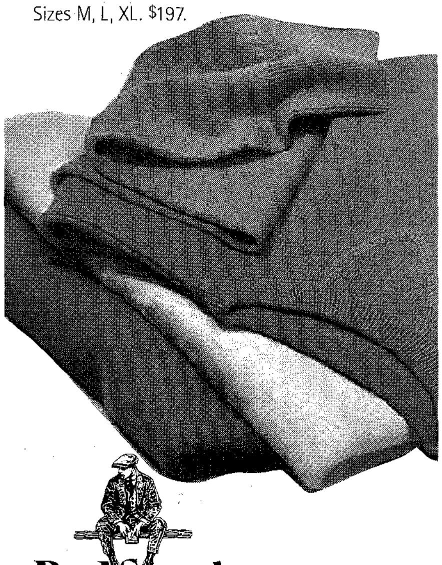

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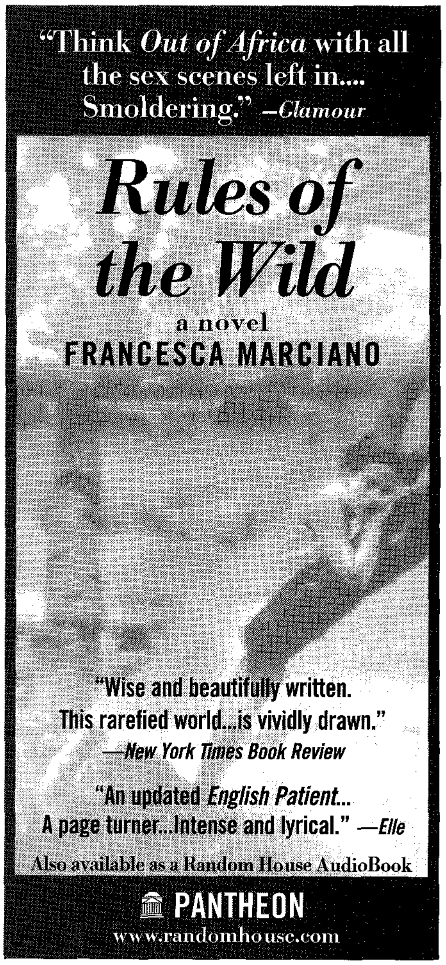

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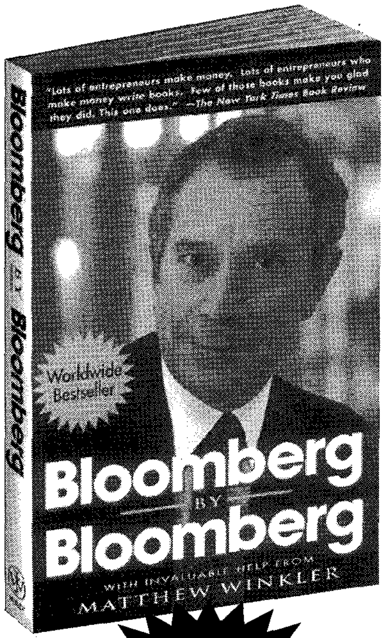
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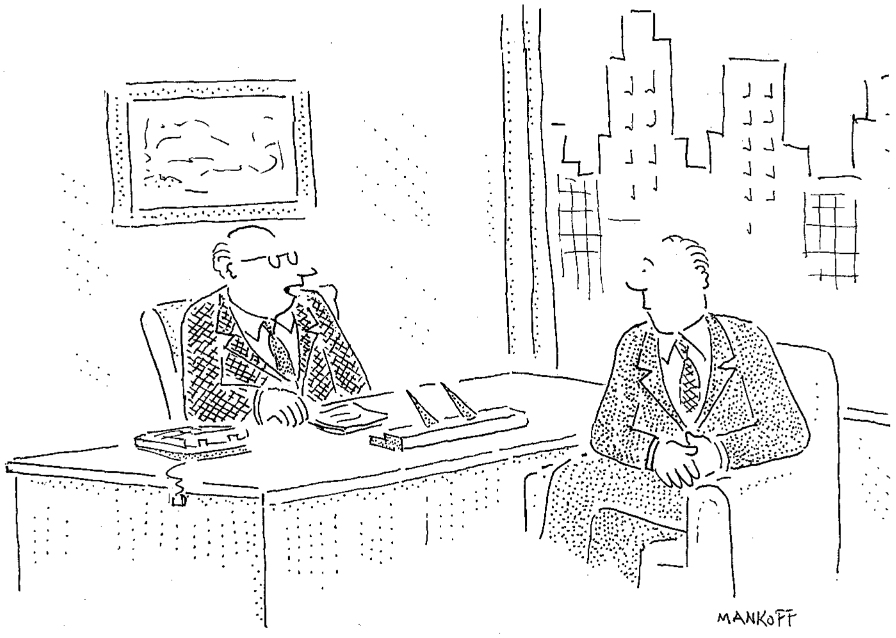

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extravaganza, the mood shift is palpable: the President has had a "good day." The White House is revitalized. The President's speechwriter Paul Begala, who had gone to ground in disgust and anger about Clinton's behavior, suddenly reëmerges as a guest on Larry King—a chirpy Presidential cheerleader once more. "Is this something that we impeach a President over?" he asks, and he adds that the prosecutors had been fundamentally unfair: "There were eighty-some-odd questions about sex, and zero about Whitewater."

At the beginning of the Clinton Administration, Begala would sometimes use an acronym: BAU—"business as usual." He meant it as a term of opprobrium. Now he was back to BAU, and seemed very much relieved about it.

Wednesday, September 23rd

In the *Times*, Maureen Dowd has written yet another scathing column—but about Ken Starr.

On the front page of the Washington *Post*, there is a headline: "HARDBALL AT THE RITZ PUTS STARR ON THE SPOT." The accompanying story raises questions about the Independent Counsel's pressure tactics against Monica Lewinsky.

Some other headlines:

In *USA Today*, which last week called for Clinton's resignation: "LAWMAKERS PICKING UP PRO-CLINTON SIGNALS."

In the *Times*: "ONCE AGAIN, AN ELUSIVE CLINTON SURPRISES EVERYONE."

In the *News*: "BUBBA BOUNCES BACK."

We have, of course, been here before with Clinton—back from the brink. And, no doubt, he will force us to come here again—back from some other brink (or back again from this same brink, if new facts emerge). But it is still strange to watch the headlong rush from the precipice. The "constitutional crisis" touted by the editorial-page writers has been downgraded to a standard political squabble—and a rather partisan squabble at that. One wonders if the long-term political danger isn't now mostly on the Republican side—assuming that the Republicans continue to push the raunchy details of the Lewinsky case into the public square. This noon, the Democrats Richard Gephardt and John Conyers, after a meeting with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, held a press conference announcing the end of the pretense of a bipartisan impeachment inquiry. They want a quick resolution, they say; the Republicans don't. The Congress is back to BAU, too.

Meanwhile, the President's job-approval rating has increased in polls taken since his testimony. In the CBS survey, Clinton's rating increased nine points, to a phenomenal sixty-eight per cent—leaving open the possibility that if the Starr assault on the President's personal life continues Clinton might soon approach the poll numbers achieved by George Washington after his Farewell Address.

Another unthinkable thought: It is not impossible that Clinton, however humiliated and disgraced he may be, could emerge as the least damaged of the three main parties to this controversy. Indeed, the President has never been nearly as unpopular as Ken Starr or the press. And now Starr's inquiry seems to be in tatters. Most of the loquacious legal experts have been saying that Clinton's performance—and the release of Monica Lewinsky's corroborating testimony—has demolished the obstruction-of-justice and witness-tampering aspects of the case. After four years, it is possible that Starr's legacy will be a series of prosecutorial dry holes—Whitewater, the Travel Office firings, the F.B.I. files mistakenly ordered up by White House security-office incompetents—and one fairly well-established count of prevaricating about an act of consensual sex between adults.

As for the press, a recent Harris poll had us ranked lowest of any profession in the public esteem—lower, even, than lawyers. In the end, one wonders what effect, if any, the frenetic electronic buzz emanating from Washington has had on the public. The all-news networks have relatively minuscule audiences—composed, it sometimes seems, mostly of other journalists and assorted political junkies. Indeed, a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs suggests that one measurable impact of the wall-to-wall Lewinsky coverage on MSNBC (and, to a lesser extent, on CNBC) was to heighten the fervor of the parent network, NBC, which, the study found, has aired significantly more (and more negative) coverage of the scandal than the two other major broadcast networks, neither of which has all-news cable affiliates. "NBC's reporters are constantly being asked to provide more material for its cable networks," the Center's president, Robert Lichter, tells me, "and therefore there's probably more material available for the NBC Nightly News."

Actually, one of the more memorable moments after the broadcast of Clinton's testimony on Monday was provided by Tom Brokaw, who made a rare and explicit editorial statement at the end of the evening news: "Judging by what we have heard so far and what we have been exposed to in language and description, the difficult days ahead would be well served by two elements missing up to this point. A viable political center to serve as a common ground for the extremes, and a little discretion to serve as a substitute for the feeding frenzy in a debate of this magnitude. These are sobering times, big questions. It should not be politics as usual."

And then Brokaw signed off: "Later tonight, on 'Dateline,' a first look at how the nation reacts to the President's testimony . . . and, of course, more coverage all night on MSNBC." ♦

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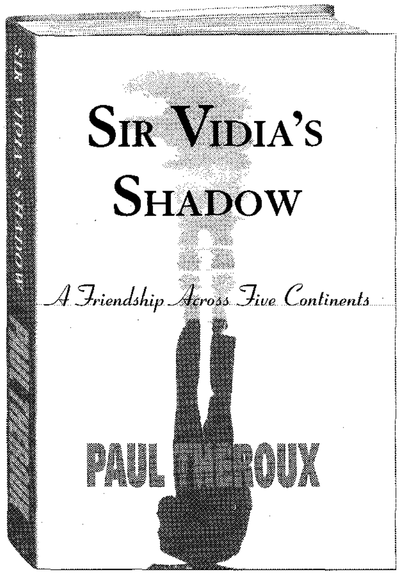

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After years of controversy and bungling, the members of the secretive Swedish Academy are more divided than ever.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

ONE Thursday in October, a man named Sture Allen will carry out what he calls "my little ritual." Just after noon, he will sit at his Louis XV desk, in the middle of a vast and immaculate office filled with mahogany furniture and marble busts that were once owned by the Swedish royal family. Then, when his golden clock strikes one, he will walk slowly to twin doors that separate his office from the Grand Hall of the Swedish Academy.

"Every year, I do it just that way," Allen said, with a gleam in his eye. "I open the door and walk into the Grand Hall, where there is"—his awed voice becomes almost too soft to hear—"the press. It is the moment that the literary world awaits each year. Publishers and writers throughout the world sit with their radios on, waiting for the news. It is the time of the highest glory, dignity, and achievement. And they are all waiting. They are all waiting for me."

Actually, they will be waiting to learn who has won this year's Nobel Prize in Literature; and Sture Allen, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy—its first among equals, both chief executive and public spokesman—is the man who delivers that message. Allen, who is sixty-nine, is not a literary scholar, a poet, or a writer. Rather, he is a linguist trained to work with computers, a fact that appalls some of his colleagues, although others in the academy consider it to be a blessing. After all, the Swedish Academy, which gives not only the Nobel Prize but also nearly fifty awards to Scandinavian writers every year, is at least in part a prize factory, and every factory needs a foreman. The Nobel is only the most celebrated of the prizes, and the richest—now worth more than a million dollars.

Each year at about this time, speculation begins to crest in Stockholm. The guessing is almost invariably wrong, and that pleases the academy members greatly. This year, the names most commonly mentioned have been those of the exiled Chinese poet Bei Dao, the perennial Flemish also-ran Hugo Claus, and the twin pillars of modern Portuguese literature, José Saramago, whose novel "The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis" is considered by many a masterpiece, and Antonio Lobo Antunes, a psychiatrist whose most important work is based on his experiences in the seventies with the Portuguese Army in Angola.

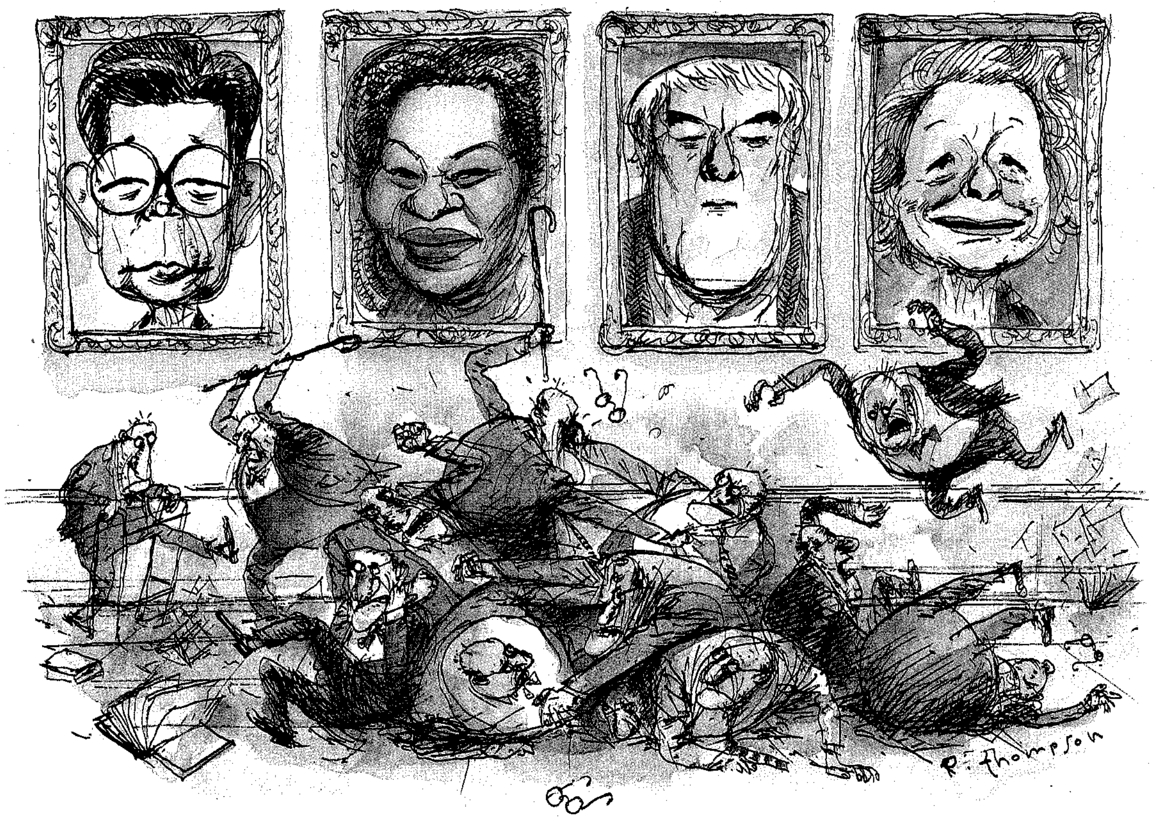
No one writing in Flemish has ever won the prize, and three years ago Claus was mistakenly told that he would be the first. There is a tradition of such disappointments—victory parties given in vain, rumors that disappear into the ether. Two years ago, I visited the Estonian writer Jaan Kross, in his flat, in Tallinn. Kross is often mentioned as a possible winner, and once, he told me, he was given "advance warning" that he would win. "I was told to stay by my phone," he recalled. "It was easy to do. I never really leave anyway. After a few hours, it was clear I wasn't going to win. It really doesn't matter, but there were some moments there when I guess I allowed myself to dream."

The best-known meditation on a prize not won belongs to Norman Mailer, who devoted the opening scenes of his 1971 book, "The Prisoner of Sex," to his reaction upon learning that he might soon be permitted to slip the letters "FNPW" (Famous Nobel Prize Winner) in front of his name. "After twenty-one years of public life," Mailer wrote of himself, "he had the equivalent of a Geiger counter in his brain to measure the radiation of advancements and awards in the various salients, wedges, and vectors of that aesthetic battlefield known as the literary pie."

Mailer is far from the only writer to entertain such Nobel desires. When I called Joyce Carol Oates not long ago to ask her what she thought of the prize, she gasped. "What have you heard?" she asked. "Do you know anything at all?"

Nobody ever does. The Nobel Prize is discussed and voted upon each year in a literary vault above the Stockholm Stock Exchange, in the city's Old Town. A committee of six is charged with directing the lengthy selection process, winnowing the field, then recommending the finalists—usually five—to the rest of the members. This year, there are six finalists; the winner will be chosen by a majority of secret ballots stuffed into an antique silver drinking mug.

Bickering is common, and the battles that kept the Nobel from Jorge Luis Borges, Graham Greene, and even, it turns out, Anthony Burgess were often intense. The war over Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet and sometime Stalinist, went on for more than a decade—until, in 1968, his Swedish translator, the imperious Artur Lundkvist, was elected to the academy and immediately made it his business to get Neruda the prize. But, in an age where privacy is increasingly rare, the rifts within the academy have never been so apparent—or so public. The conflicts today are usually portrayed as generational disputes within the academy, but the problems are also deeply personal. Members are forbidden to discuss their deliberations, but, even if they were not, they would have trouble finding the time: they are simply too busy savaging each other.



Above the fray: Kenzaburo Oe, Toni Morrison, Seamus Heaney, and Wislawa Szymborska. Illustrations by Richard Thompson.

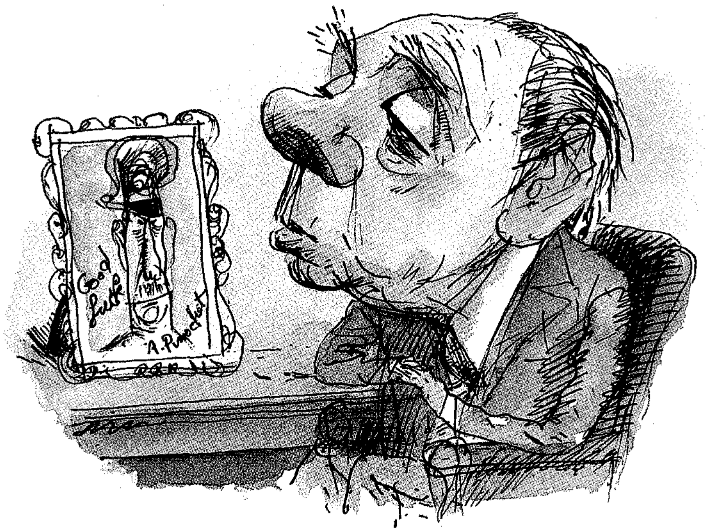
THE mission of the academy was set in 1786 by its founder, Gustav III, the Francophile king of Sweden: he created it to protect the "purity, vigour, and majesty" of the Swedish language; the Nobel Prize, first awarded in 1901, was an afterthought, imposed upon the academy by the industrialist Alfred Nobel in his will. Today, the academy is widely regarded as among the last defenders—and supporters—of intellectual pursuit, a citadel of high culture in a country that in many ways has become as rootless as any in Western Europe: to surf among the television channels in Stockholm is to be bombarded not with Bergman but with Ricki Lake, Jennifer Aniston, and the best years of "Miami Vice."

During formal discussions, the academy members maintain an enforced civility—Mr., Miss, and Mrs. are used at all times—that creates a sort of verbal bubble wrap. But when the meetings end, the wrap is quickly torn away, and the academy has become so burdened by its factional disputes that animosity can no longer be contained. Stockholm's tiny literary community follows the academy's skirmishes with glee, the way some Americans dwell on the venality of the Starr report or on the excitement of a historic home-run race. The members may act like a group of English professors struggling for dominance in their department at, say, the University of Lund, but their motto—"*Snille och Smak*" ("Talent and Taste")—could once also have been seen as a motto for the nation.

"The academy is the ultimate symbol of Sweden as it was," I was told by Bjorn Linnell, who has been a Stockholm publisher and is now an editor at *Modern Times*, the country's leading monthly journal of arts and letters. "Aloof, independent, smart. But our country has lost its way these last few years. We have all the problems everyone else has. Our famous middle way has disappeared with inflation and unemployment and doubts about the future. We are no longer special. And when we look at the academy—the great academy, supposedly filled with our finest minds—it is quite obvious to most of us that they are no longer special, either."

THIS harsh judgment is expressed with greater frequency as the disputes within the academy become more public. Artur Lundkvist, Neruda's champion, was the first to break the Nobel code of *omertà*, when he vowed to outlive Graham Greene, if only to deny him the Nobel. Lundkvist also denounced William Golding, who won in 1983, as "a little English phenomenon of no special interest." The true ugliness, however, did not burst fully into view until 1989, when Sture Allen, exercising his power as permanent secretary, worked to prevent the academy from taking a position on the Iranian fatwa against Salman Rushdie over the publication of his novel "The Satanic Verses."

Allen had already infuriated several members of the academy when, two years earlier, he insisted that he, and not the poet Johannes Edfeldt, introduce Joseph Brodsky at the Prize Ceremony. His stand on Rushdie drove two of the academy's most distinguished members to resign publicly. "It was pretty simple," Gabi Gleichmann, who was the head of the PEN chapter in Sweden, told me. "A sovereign nation had condemned a writer to death for expressing his views. And we expected some response from the world's most respected literary authorities. What we got was bureaucracy. Because Mr. Allen is really just a bureaucrat. After that, the Nobel committee seemed like a joke to me."



"Borges got an award from Pinochet as an old man," an insider said. "That was enough to keep Latin America's greatest writer from ever winning the prize."

The Swedish Academy is not unlike one of those nineteenth-century British men's clubs that line Pall Mall. Its reading room, above the Stock Exchange, holds one of the largest libraries in Sweden. Members spend their time in soft leather chairs and after their meetings they adjourn to dine in a private room in one of Stockholm's best restaurants. New members, chosen secretly by the academy, can be nominated only to replace the dead (and the rules demand a month of silence before names may even be mentioned). Last year, two spaces opened. One went to the novelist and critic Per Wästberg, who is sixty-four, and is viewed in Sweden as a kindly literary diplomat. No one is more clubbable. Wästberg is known throughout the world, from Zimbabwe (President Mugabe's wife once served as nanny to his children) to New York. He has long been active in human rights, and was the first writer in Sweden to insist publicly that the country recall its ambassador from Iran over the Rushdie affair.

The other new member, the critic Horace Engdahl, who is forty-nine, has been described publicly by his enemies in Stockholm's literary community in words better reserved for an axe murderer. Engdahl's brilliance is acknowledged even by his many detractors, but his views have inspired much of the animosity that currently permeates the Swedish Academy. A post-structuralist, Engdahl is in the forefront of those critics and academics who concentrate on textual analyses, challenging all that many older members of the academy consider fundamental about literature.

Engdahl is a polite, aristocratic man who speaks in Edwardian sentences, and during one long conversation recently he claimed that envy and misunderstanding were the primary motives for the attacks on him. "My opponents set out with a violent fury to destroy me completely," he said, and he flinched—as if the day when he was named to the world's most distinguished literary academy were a hideous flashback. He went on to say, "The morning I opened *Svenska Dagblat*"—Sweden's leading conservative paper—"I saw the first article. It was simply a vicious, unrestrained attack on me as a human being, and as a thinker." The extraordinary assault on Engdahl was written by Knut Ahnlund, a member of the academy and one of Sweden's most famous essayists and literary historians. "Ahnlund accused me of destroying the moral nerve of this nation," Engdahl recalled. "Of ruining intellectual dialogue in this country. Of many worse things. To him, I am the devil. He is a beautiful writer but a very egocentric and petty man. He is a perfect example of what Nietzsche meant by a man of resentment."

Ahnlund, who is seventy-five, has had a primary role for more than a quarter century in the handing out of the Nobel Prize. A big man, often described as "eccentric," he dresses like a lumberjack and recently published a widely admired biography that revealed the sexual obsessions of Sven Lidman, one of Sweden's prominent religious leaders. Ahnlund is open in his admiration of Norman Mailer ("I argued so many times for him"), of Bernard Malamud ("Just as deserving as Saul Bellow"), and, above all, of Portugal's José Saramago. He says that if a book doesn't have a story to tell he doesn't want to read it, and describes Engdahl's approach to literature as "cold and clinical."

Ahnlund reserves his greatest bitterness for Allen, the academy's permanent secretary, and he stopped attending meetings two years ago, having grown weary of what he views as Allen's craving for absolute power. "Sture Allen is an intellectual accountant," Ahnlund told me. "He has no vision at all. No perspective. He doesn't even read. Yet he is the leader of the Swedish Academy. What more needs to be said about

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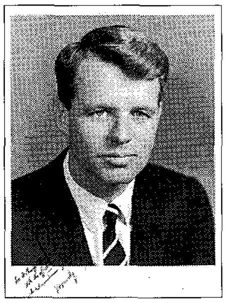

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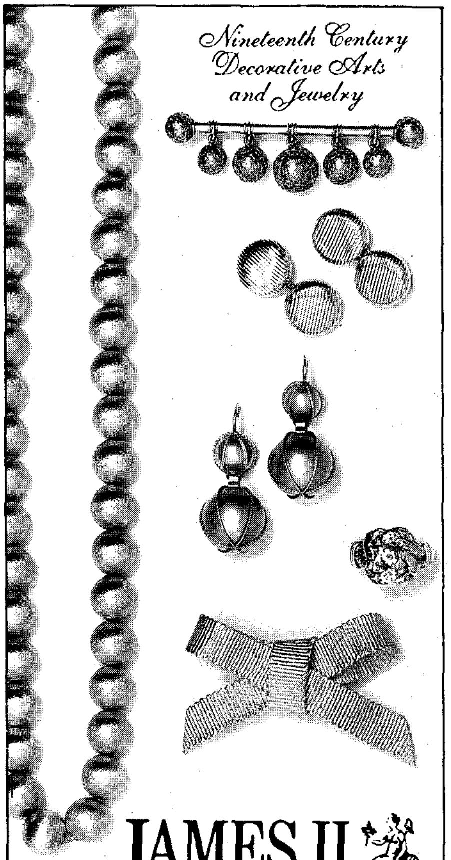

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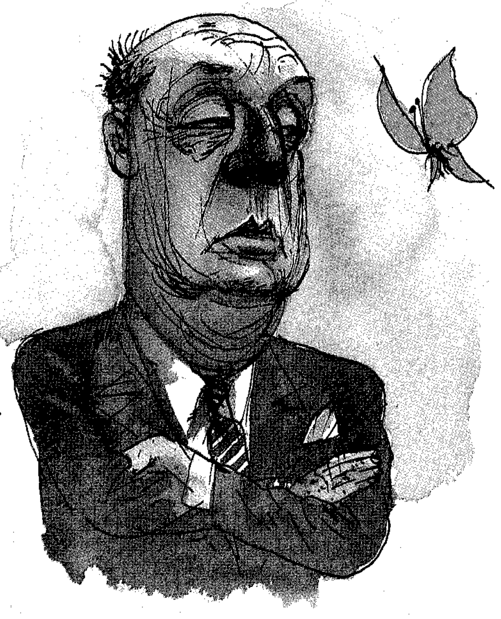
that institution than that such a weak man, a man who counts verbs with a computer for his living, is in charge of it? It is a disgrace to our nation."

Allen, who parts with each word as if it were being dragged from his mouth with pliers, has grown used to such verbal cruelty. "This is a far more complicated issue than you think," he told me firmly, shaking his head as he spoke. "What has happened to this academy is complex, and I only wish I could explain it to you. But I cannot speak more fully about it, because what we do here is secret, and it must remain so. I can only add this." He then referred to four members who have left the academy in recent years, all of whom had fights with him over his management style. "They have no right to quit. A member is elected for life. They each signed a statute, they took an oath. They agreed to serve as long as they live. If they wish to sit at home, I cannot stop them. But I also do not have the power to free them from obligations they took eagerly onto themselves. That will happen only when they die."

THE membership of the Swedish Academy includes novelists, poets, and critics, but very few of the nation's best writers are among them. Neither are most popular writers, like Astrid Lindgren, the author of the Pippi Longstocking books, or the poet and novelist Lars Gustafsson, who now spends much of his time in Texas. "Committees do strange things in this world," Gustafsson told me when I telephoned him in Austin. "It's not necessarily the best way to spend your time. Maybe old men with beards have better things to do than sit at a table and read mediocre books."

Many members of the academy concede that its demands on their time make it difficult for them to produce worthwhile writing of their own. "This is a job," said Per Wästberg, who was for years the editor of *Dagens Nyheter,* the country's most influential newspaper. "You read and read and read. In most people's eyes, the Swedish Academy should be the ultimate élite institution, where the very best writers are to be found. But many great writers are unruly bohemians and drunkards. They would be useless. The truth is that you have to find people who will read the books, come to the meetings, do it all for no money, and be happy about it."

Since 1901, when the Swedish Academy awarded its first Nobel Prize—to the aging French poet René Sully-Prudhomme, instead of to the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (who never won it, because, in an assessment the committee later made public, he preached "theoretical anarchism and mystical Christianity")—it has become something of a tradition, in Sweden and beyond, to attack the decisions, motives, intellect, and ethics of the people who award the prize. (After Sully-Prudhomme's election, forty-two Swedish writers issued an open letter denouncing the prize and paying tribute to Tolstoy.)



Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most lamented non-laureates.

"Criticism is often justified," Per Wästberg said. Before joining the academy, he wrote regular pleas for Graham Greene, always hoping that Greene would win, until he finally realized that he was wasting his time. Even now—although he is a member of the academy and of the Nobel committee—Wästberg doesn't mind mentioning that, like Ahnlund, he leans toward postwar Americans. "There are mistakes, of course," he said. "Although the academy sometimes acts like the Church, the doctrine of infallibility does not apply." He called the politically motivated 1965 award to the Soviet-era writer Mikhail Sholokhov one of the academy's worst acts—"a complete disgrace. He was not worthy in any way."

Wästberg went on, "Still, to me the critics of these awards often look like provincial fools, particularly, I am sorry to say, the Americans. Whenever somebody is named—Szymborska, of Poland, comes to mind here—there is a huge cry in America. It is surprising, and distressing, from such a literate nation. It's as if, since they don't know this work, it had to be bad."

The prize has, of course, gone to some of the finest writers of the century—Yeats, Mann, Faulkner, Hamsun, and Beckett—but somehow that has never dispelled the controversy. Neither Joyce nor Nabokov received the award, and it has gone to many writers (Pearl Buck, for example) whose accomplishments seemed thin at the time and seem even thinner today. Two people have rejected the prize: Boris Pasternak, who was pressured to by the Soviet government, and Jean-Paul Sartre, who refused out of principle. (After his death, his surviving relatives made the pilgrimage to Stockholm to demand the money that goes with the prize. They were rebuffed.)

In the Nobel's first forty-five years, only two people from outside Europe and America won the prize, but since the Second World War the range has steadily broadened, and, because it is impossible to keep track of literature written in five hundred languages, the committee relies on a large network of scouts and translators. In 1968, the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata won, and recent winners have included the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka (1986), the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz (1988), and the South African Nadine Gordimer (1991). Committee members talk constantly of "enlarging the mandate," and they admit that they consider shock a valuable weapon. Shock, critics respond, is a curious criterion for the world's most distinguished and valuable literary prize. The academy is also accused of being far too politically correct in its choices—so eager to make a point of openness that its members have stopped reading books. One presumption, rarely expressed directly, is that somehow the prize is less legitimate if it goes to a new voice or to a member of a minority. "The ideal candidate for a Nobel Prize today would be a lesbian from Asia," according to Mats Geller-

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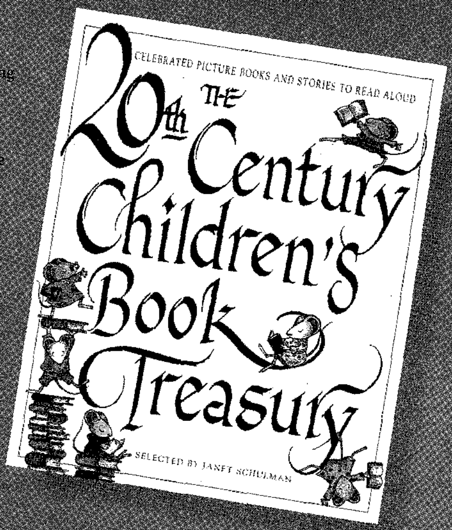
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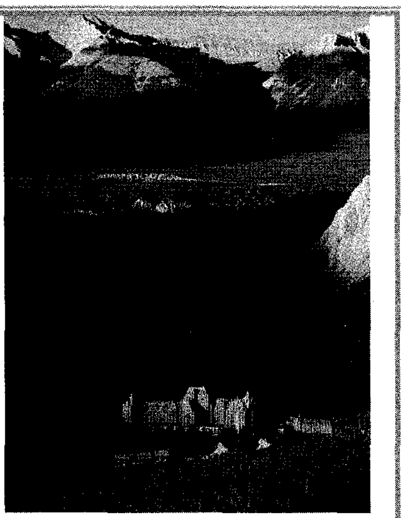

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felt, who is one of Sweden's leading literary critics and a cultural conservative; he thinks the prize has become cheapened by publicity and popularity.

Toni Morrison, who in 1993 became the first African-American to receive the prize, told me, "If a white male wins it, they would not say it's political. So I can't take the criticism seriously. I know and you know that if an African-American wins it, or somebody from a Third World country wins it—somebody who is not from America, the center of the universe—they say it's political. 'Political' is a real word, and it has real meaning. But it is a term here that is sly and suggests something not superior. When it is used this way, it is a racist term."

TODAY, the academy never manages to insulate itself from politics completely. Although it has established procedures that make lobbying useless, writers do what they can to advance themselves. By the beginning of each year, when the committee starts culling the list, calfskin-bound collections from bad writers all over the world start appearing at the committee offices.

"Oh, the pressure of being Swedish can get very great," Wästberg said, not entirely in jest. "Whenever I travel somewhere and am introduced as a Swedish writer, people always perk up." Wästberg went on to describe his first meeting with Pablo Neruda: "I met him in Bled in 1965. When he learned that I was a Swede, he immediately invited me to dinner. He assumed I had an influence which I did not possess. The next year, I was invited to stay in his villa by the sea. This Communist ideologue lived in astonishingly splendid baronial luxury. Each day, when he was in the mood, he would walk to the dock and signal to a fisherman with a great red flag. That meant he wanted fresh lobsters. They always appeared in a hurry. Neruda was fully obsessed with the Nobel Prize. He realized he had an adversary on the committee in Gunnar Ekelöf. Ekelöf believed that Neruda had a role in the murder of Trotsky. Neruda was counsel for Chile in Mexico at the time, and he always denied it. He once said he would outlive Ekelöf and win the prize. And he did."

Academy members insist that political considerations never affect their decisions. However, it has been noted that the Finnish writer Frans Eemil Sillan-

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pää won the Nobel in 1939, just as the Soviet Union was attempting to make his country disappear, and that Czeslaw Milosz's selection, in 1980, came in the year that Solidarity was born in a Gdansk shipyard. Was it pure chance that Yeats won in 1923, the year after Ireland was granted its independence?

When I asked Sture Allen if politics played an important role in the prize decisions, he laughed, but the laugh was a sneer. "We care only for literary merit," he insisted. "It is not the World Cup of literature. It is not a reward for good service. We find a great writer. And that is all we do."

Why, then, has China never produced a laureate? I asked.

"There was something called the Cultural Revolution that happened there," Allen replied. "It has been a problem for China. And it has been a problem for us."

I later asked about Asian writers in general and got a similar rebuff. He described reading most Pakistani and Indian writers as "wading through gibberish," and added, "Their work is usually no more than rhetoric."

Politics was clearly a problem for Borges, and Knut Ahnlund, among many others, regards his omission as unforgivable. "Borges got an award from Pinochet as an old man," Ahnlund said, with genuine anger. "That was enough to keep Latin America's greatest writer from ever winning the prize." Ahnlund added, "Of course politics matters. Look at the list. If you celebrated Stalin in Sweden, that was fine—you could win the Nobel Prize. But God help you if you were infatuated with Nazi uniforms as a little boy. Because then you were disgraced for the rest of your life."

I asked Ahnlund whether V. S. Naipaul had ever come close to winning the prize; he grimaced, then nodded. I asked him about reports that Naipaul is thought by academy members to have a cold view of humanity, and that his critical work on Islam is too controversial. "It's not any outside moral argument," Ahnlund said. "It's really only the simple fact that he never collected enough votes."

LAST year, the academy took special pleasure in awarding the Nobel Prize to Dario Fo. Readers were stunned. Fo has been compared to medieval court jesters, to Jerry Lewis,

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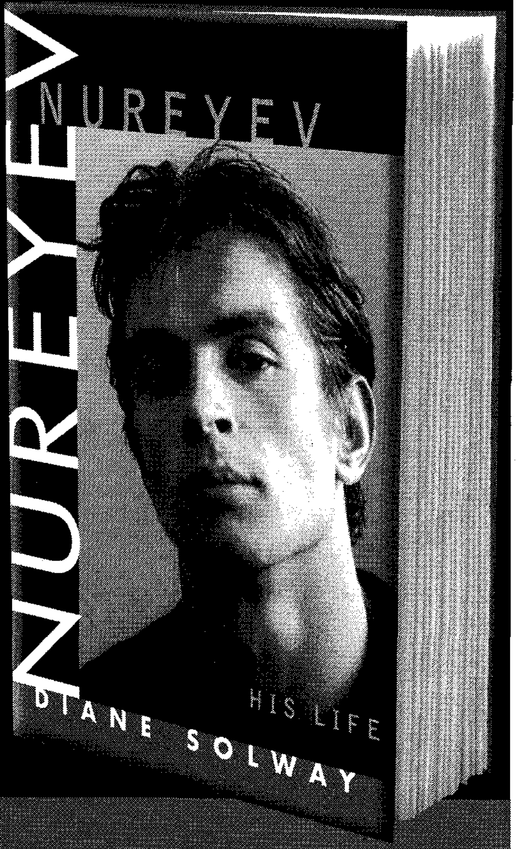

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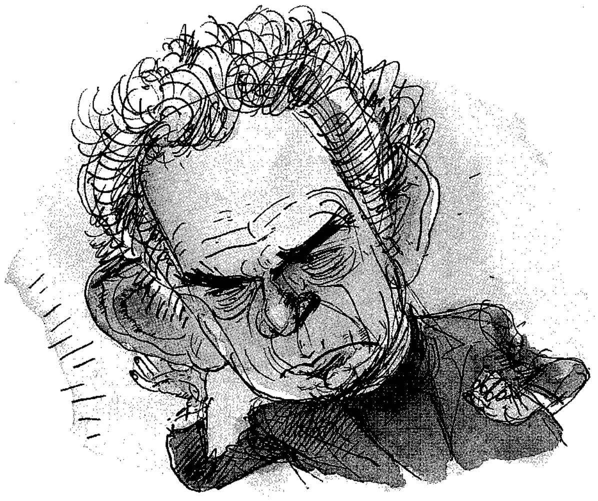
and to Lenny Bruce. Never, however, to Pirandello (who won in 1934)—or even to Ionesco. As a left-wing political figure (who was once banned from entering the United States) and a critic of the Vatican, he has had some impact with his monologues and plays. But are they literature?

"It's just plain ridiculous," said Roger Straus, the head of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, which has published the works of more Nobel laureates than any other American house. "I don't even know what it is that you would call what Dario Fo does, but literature is certainly not a word that comes to mind. That award harmed the Nobel. It was a complete joke."

In Stockholm, it is said that Straus may be more right about the joke than he realizes. Like other Nobel rumors, this one bounces through the literary community, from critic to writer to playwright. Committee members smile when it comes up, and, of course, nobody will comment. "You know, for years there has been this trouble with whether to give the prize to one of two Portuguese writers," a professor who has close knowledge of the academy told me. And for years Lars Forssell, who is one of the academy members most interested in shock therapy for the moribund institution, has proposed Dario Fo. "Nobody ever took him seriously until last year," the professor said. "Then they just went and did it."



In 1969, Norman Mailer was rumored to have won the prize, but the call never came.

"Obviously, there are a number of great playwrights alive today," said Wästberg, who had only just begun participating in deliberations for the prize that will be awarded this year. "That goes without question. And Dario Fo is not among them. That goes without question, too."

In a time when nearly every shopping mall has a cyber café, and television commands increasing attention, it is no accident that literature's most prestigious prize is awarded in Sweden, where writers are so highly esteemed. Sweden sells more books per capita than almost any other country; the works of Nobelists remain a favorite Christmas gift, and literary achievement still matters. The academy has been compiling the definitive historical dictionary of Swedish for more than a century. ("We are now concluding the letter 'S,'" Sture Allen told me with great pride. "The last volume should be published by the year 2017.") Not surprisingly, prizes, particularly the Nobel Prize, are among the few enduring traditions that keep together the idea of a world literature.

"Goethe coined the phrase 'world literature,'" said Engdahl, the controversial post-structuralist who will almost certainly lead the academy in the coming years, "and it rested at the time on a thin layer of upper-class people. They all knew each other and spoke French and Latin. A person like Goethe could claim that he knew everything of importance in literature. Today, there are no such persons. Universities specialize. The world is so fragmented now. This academy is one of the only places where the concept of a world literature still matters. This year, there is certainly no obvious winner. Various tastes are in competition, and nobody can predict the result. Whoever that person is will be criticized—as will we. But won't the result really only aid the literary enterprise we all so dearly love?"

Outside Sweden, most of the academy's work goes unnoticed. Little attention was paid last year when it awarded the Bellman Prize, which honors "a truly outstanding Swedish poet," to Eva Runefelt, whose spare, telling style has estab-

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lished her as one of Sweden's finest young writers. I invited Runefelt to meet me for a drink and to talk about the work of the academy, although she is not a member.

We met at the Grand Hotel, the place where Nobel laureates stay when they come to collect their medals. This week, the Rolling Stones were in town. The Stones, their entourage, and about three hundred groupies had turned the stately lobby into an upmarket staging area for a rock concert. I nevertheless spotted Runefelt, who had told me, "I'm blond. And I'll be wearing black."

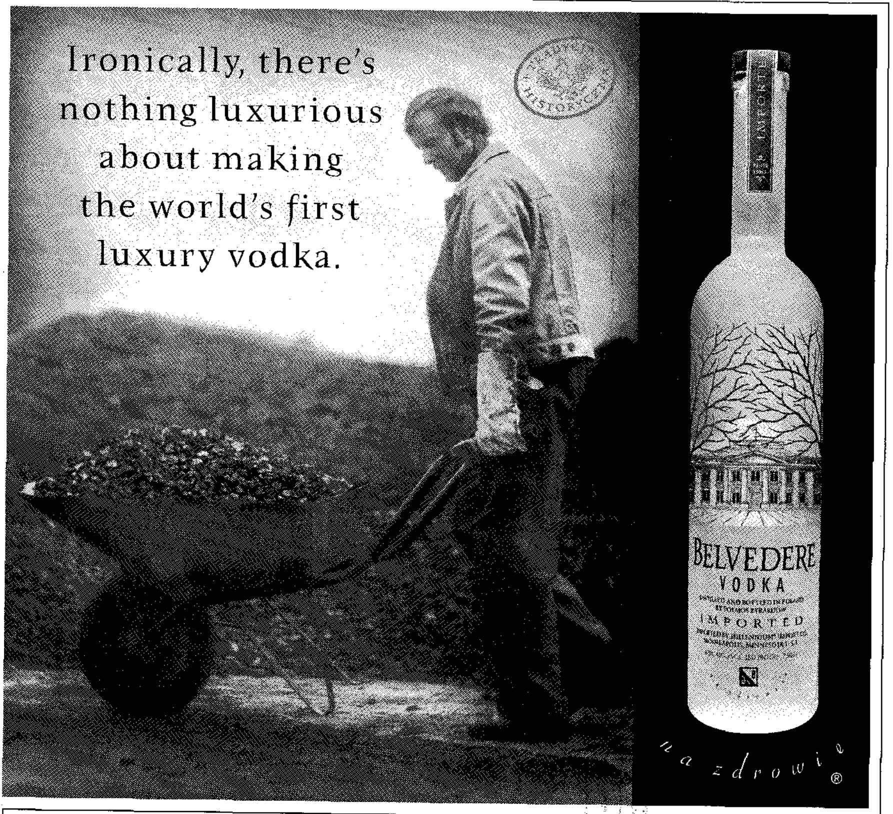
In many respects, the forty-five-year-old Runefelt is what King Gustav's academy is really about. Of her prize money—the Bellman is worth about thirty thousand dollars—she asked, "How could I not be grateful to the academy for that? Do you have any idea what that kind of money means to a poet who is trying to live by her writing?"

It means a good deal. Even for a fine writer like Runefelt, earning much more than ten thousand dollars in a year from poetry would be impossible. "It's not as if we have patrons of the arts," she said.

The Nobel is unlikely to be given to any Swedish writer (although the poet Tomas Transtromer is said to have been shortlisted). Yet no other literary prize so obsesses the Swedes. One day, I asked Maria Schottenius, the culture editor of the liberal daily *Expressen*, why that was true. She replied without hesitation, "What do we have in Sweden? We have Volvo, smorgasbord, Björn Borg, and the prize. How can the prize not matter? It is the fashion to laugh and say we are above it. But we are not. When the academy seems foolish, we feel foolish, too. And when the prize sinks, so do we." ♦

The police department is badly in need of replacing the cruiser it currently has. The cruiser is a 1988 model with over 110,000 miles on it and is rusting out. The seat belts no longer work. The windows do not close properly. The oil pan is leaking. The air condition is broken. The seats are broken. The exhaust is leaking. The headlight holder has rusted out. The roof leaks water when it rains, and is rusted out. Although the car looks ok from the outside, the cruiser has had body work done for the past 3 years in a row to patch up the rust and be painted. —*Gilsum (N.H.) Police Department annual report.*

And to think we got a ticket for that broken tail-light.



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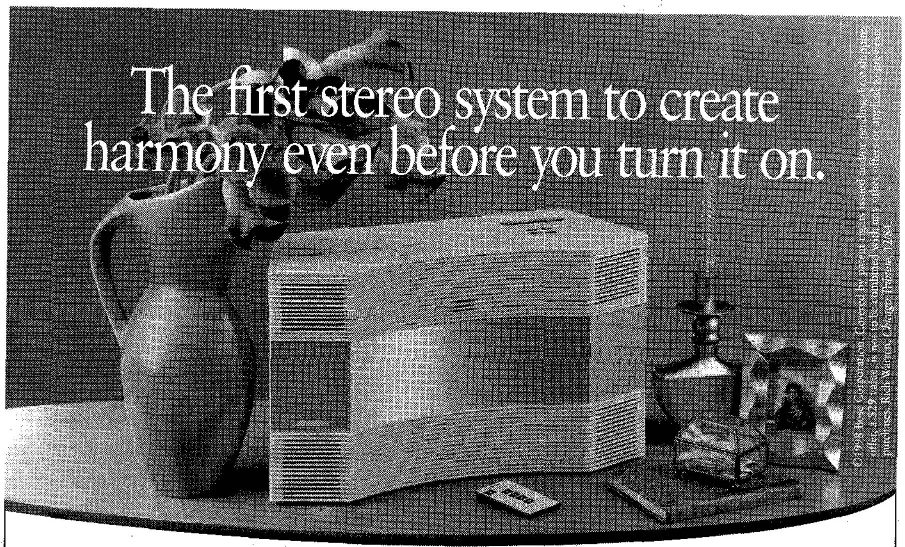
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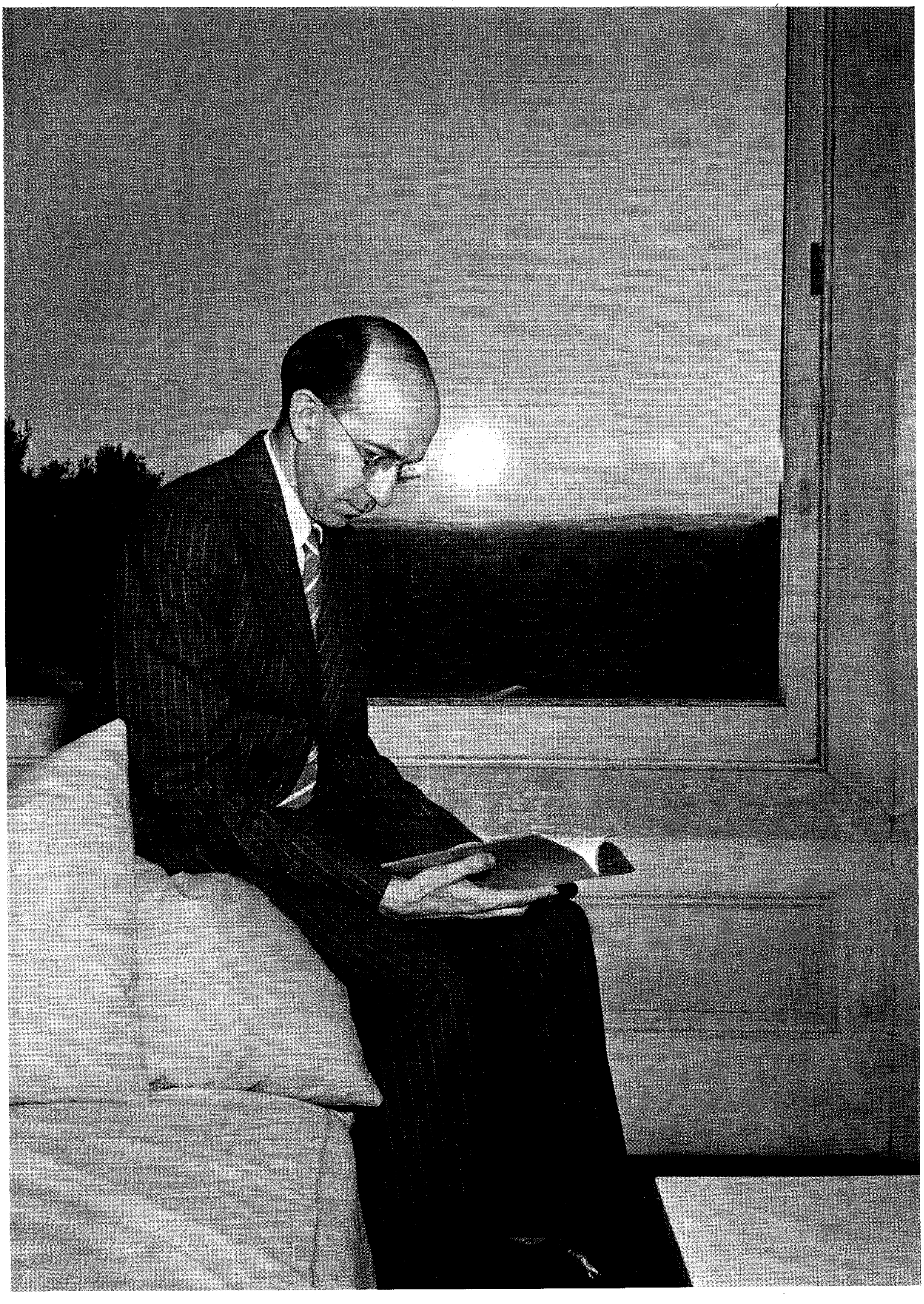


COURTESY YADDO

LIFE AND LETTERS

THE SCARLET PROFESSOR

In a notable invasion of privacy, police raided the home of one of America's most esteemed literary critics and exposed his secret life.

BY BARRY WERTH

On the afternoon of September 2, 1960, two unmarked patrol cars bearing three state troopers, a federal postal inspector, and a local policeman pulled up to a three-story brick Victorian house in Northampton, Massachusetts, where Newton Arvin lived alone in a top-floor apartment. Arvin, who was sixty years old, was the Mary Augusta Jordan Professor of Literature at Smith College—a much honored literary biographer, who was renowned, in particular, for his studies of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. The intruders mounted the winding wooden staircase so stealthily that the tenant on the first floor failed to hear them. Hesitantly, Arvin let them in. During the next hour, the police searched Arvin's four tidy, cloistered rooms—his "cave," he called them—and confiscated a large cache of homosexual erotica. They also seized his journals, in which he had meticulously documented his sexual activities and desires.

Arvin, a timid man, who wore rubbers at the least hint of rain, was arrested on charges of possessing "obscene pictures" and of "lewdness"—offenses that carried a maximum prison term of five years and a fine of twenty-five thousand dollars. He was taken to the local police station, and there he surrendered the names of fifteen other men who, he told the police, also collected homoerotic pictures. The next day, he admitted himself to the Massachusetts state mental hospital that overlooks the Smith campus, where he remained for more than a month. On September 20th, he pleaded guilty in District Court and received a one-year suspended sentence.

Afterward, Arvin tried to explain himself in a letter to an old friend of his, David Lilienthal, the retired head of the Atomic Energy Commission:

> It must be very difficult, if not impossible, for you to understand what has happened, or to comprehend all the behavior that led up to the crisis. . . . For the time being, perhaps you will just have to set it down to the well-known contradictoriness, indeed perverseness, of human behavior generally.

Lilienthal, who had known Arvin for fifty years, found it incomprehensible that his boyhood friend was the leader of the small-town homosexual smut ring described in the local headlines. Other illustrious friends of Arvin were also dismayed. "I regard Mr. Newton Arvin as one of the two or three best contemporary writers on American classical literature," Edmund Wilson wrote in a testimonial, which had been solicited by Arvin's lawyer. "I am unable to believe the charges against him . . . which sound like a fantasy of the local police distorted by an incompetent reporter."

But, except for the vice-squad bluster about Arvin's being the leader of a conspiratorial ring, the charges were true. Throughout the nineteen-fifties, Arvin had collected and traded homosexual erotica, some of it hard-core but the bulk of it stylized beefcake pictures culled from muscle magazines with titles like *Adonis*, *Tomorrow's Man*, and *Physique Pictorial*. His attic apartment had provided a haven for younger men with whom he could relax and, occasionally, have sex. To his friends and colleagues, the details were shocking: his furtiveness; the relative youthfulness of the other men; and, worst of all, his betrayal of others. Suddenly, Arvin's literary and academic friends were confronted with what seemed an unbridgeable gulf between their lives and Arvin's—one that, back in 1960, made him into someone whose private self was beyond their understanding.

In researching a new book about the Arvin case, I have been struck by the depth of that gulf, and also by how effectively, both before and after his trial, Arvin was able, through his celebrated writings, to smuggle his outcast sensibility into mainstream American culture. Arvin's first great theme, as a writer, was the secrecy that marks so many private lives. By investigating the psychological drives of some of our most important authors through the prism of his own secret life, he was illuminating the hidden aspects of America's Puritan character.

"I KNOW very well," Arvin wrote in an unpublished memoir, "that I did not have a wretchedly unhappy childhood of the sort that appears in some autobiographies—a childhood of utter misery and almost unrelieved distress. On the other hand, I know too that I very early began to be painfully aware of the harshness and even the cruelty of 'the world,' and to react to this in all kinds of childish and deplorable ways—by a most reprehensible habit of querulous complainingness, by fits of temper and tears, by tantrums, by the indulgence of fears, by quarrelsomeness and irritability. 'So small a boy and so great a sinner!' "

He elaborated:

> I was certainly a girlish small boy, not a virile one, even in promise, and the world of boys being what it is, I was not long in being made aware of this. I was timid, shrinking, weak, and unventuresome; I had no skill in boyish games and sports, and no interest in them, and I was quickly penalized as a result—by taunts, jeers, and sometimes, though rarely, blows. . . . And from then on I was never wholly without the sense . . . of radical difference from, and inferiority to, my male contemporaries, or the sense of the inimical in the social world around me.

Valparaiso, Indiana, where Frederick Newton Arvin was born, in 1900, was the sort of insular Midwestern farm town that was soon to be harshly memorialized in Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio" and Sinclair Lewis's "Main Street." Arvin developed few boyhood friends. In-

Arvin at Yaddo, in 1940: In Hawthorne, he detected the dark strains of Puritan America through the lens of a double life.

stead, he immersed himself in books. In the ninth grade, he started keeping a daily journal—a discipline he maintained for fifty years—in which he wrote mainly about what he was reading. Before he could wear trousers, he had discovered in reading and writing an antidote to the Babbittry he associated with his father—a cold, overbearing insurance executive, who was away much of the time, and who Arvin was sure despised him.

Arvin early became aware of having homoerotic emotions, and he was careful not to mention them to anyone. As he reports in his memoir, at eleven or twelve he had an experience in which he and an older boy fondled each other on a fence. What he recalled most vividly, however, was the warmth and tenderness—the "undefinable element"—he felt toward another "good-looking and engaging" boy.

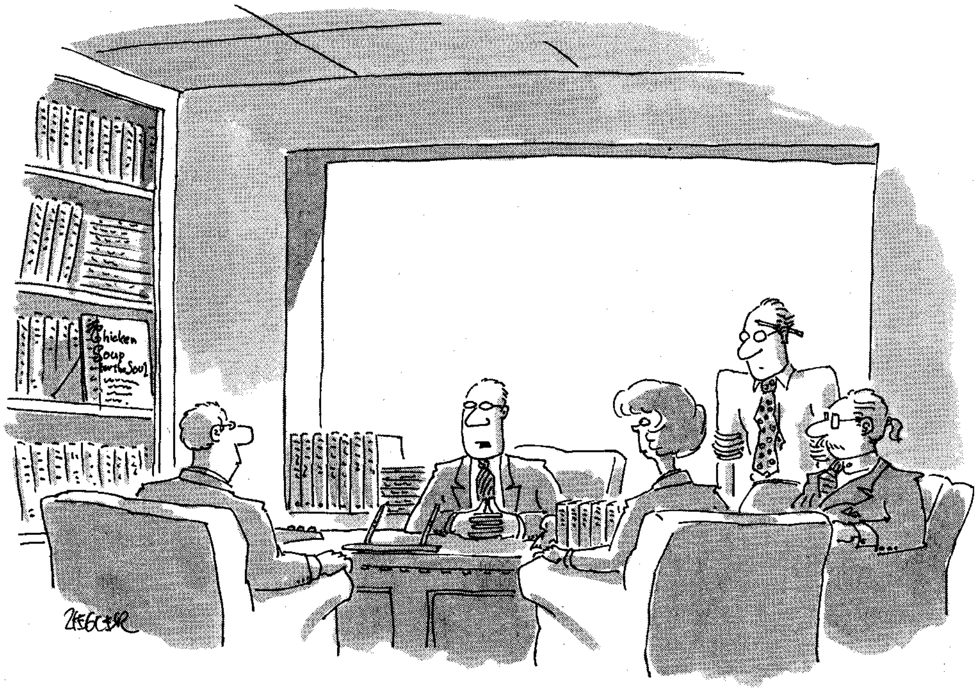
In Arvin's senior year at Harvard, from which he graduated summa cum laude, in 1921, he began sending unsolicited reviews to Van Wyck Brooks, who was then the country's best-known book critic. Brooks admired the young man's breadth and sophistication, and wrote back to him, "You are a critic by nature." At the same time, Brooks cautioned that if he was to write anything lasting he would have to experience life beyond the ivory tower. Arvin's response was to teach—first at a private school for boys in Detroit, where, desperately unhappy, he failed to finish out the year. In 1922, he became a freshman-composition instructor at Smith, the nation's premier women's college. There, Arvin quickly set himself apart. At Harvard, he had been a political progressive with Bolshevik leanings, and two years after moving to Northampton he chaired the local La Follette for President committee, campaigning stridently against the incumbent—Calvin Coolidge, the home-town hero, who had been a mayor of Northampton and still maintained a house in Arvin's ward. Writing to Lilienthal of Coolidge's eventual victory, Arvin noted wryly, "I think it will possibly save me from the kindnesses of a lot of respectable (and very dull) people who rather enjoy a literary radical but gag at a political one."

Arvin's first book was a critical biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne that was published in 1929. Reading Hawthorne, he identified dark strains in Puritan America, which perhaps only someone who had spent much of his life in hiding could detect as fully. Like Arvin, Hawthorne had withdrawn from the world, substituting literature for life, yet that retreat had led him to discover the great theme that would pervade his most important books—what Arvin called "the dark connection between guilt and secrecy." In Hawthorne's Calvinist America—the Colonial America of "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of the Seven Gables"—people were punished most harshly not for their acts but for their secrets.

As Van Wyck Brooks had done before him, Arvin sought to remove any trace of Victorian "femininity" from his prose. Vigorously, and with barely disguised personal urgency, he wrote, "The essential sin, [Hawthorne] would seem to say, lies in whatever shuts up the spirit in a dungeon where it is alone, beyond the reach of common sympathies and the general sunlight. All that isolates, damns; all that associates, saves."

"Hawthorne" made Arvin's reputation as a critic and a biographer. He became a regular guest at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. A shy, scholarly figure, barely thirty years old, Arvin was almost a caricature of the mousy young English professor: standing five feet eight inches tall and weighing a hundred and twenty-five pounds, he had a round face, gray-green eyes glinting behind gold, wire-rimmed glasses, a pockmarked forehead, and thinning brown hair, neatly trimmed and combed. A friend recalled that he "wore a dark suit to breakfast, sat like a furled umbrella, and buttered his toast to the edges." But he was cordial, charming, and savagely witty, and he seemed to have read everything; even Yaddo's most imposing personalities sought him out as a rising figure in the literary left. Like many other writers of the time, Arvin responded to the Depression with a keen awareness of social injustice, and in 1932 he pledged—with Lincoln Steffens, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser—to vote Communist.

Although Arvin had turned away from his father—in college he dropped their shared first name, "Frederick"—he hoped to disprove "the official family forecast for my future," which he described as "very gloomy." To that end, he married one of his former students, Mary Garrison, in 1932. A vivacious blonde, she was Arvin's opposite—"a great Valkyrian figure," Daniel Aaron, one of Arvin's closest friends on the Smith English faculty, recalled. "She could make ten meals of Newton." For both of them, the next eight years were disastrous. Arvin, who was working on a biography of Walt Whitman, gave his young wife one of the poet's ambiguously homoerotic verses, in the hope that she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would understand his sexual preferences. She didn't. They divorced in 1940, but the strains of their marriage led both of them to suffer nervous breakdowns.

Arvin had male lovers—what his hospital records called "suspicious alliances with other men"—and he faithfully reported them in his journals. Like Edmund Wilson, with whom he became friends when Wilson taught at Smith for a term, he documented his sexual encounters as if they were not quite real until they were written down and pressed, like flowers, between the covers of a book. Recently, I drove to Wellesley, Massachusetts, to visit Charles Pierce and his younger sister, Barbara Arvin Pierce—two bank executives, whose mother was Arvin's niece. Sifting through a cardboard box of materials that Arvin had collected for his memoir—old letters, high-school journals, lecture notes, and other faded documents—I found a tattered photograph album from the thirties, when Arvin was married to Mary Garrison. It contained only one photograph of people—a group shot of Arvin, the composer Aaron Copland, the theatrical director Harold Clurman, and the Yaddo executive director Elizabeth Ames standing on a rustic porch overlooking Lake George. All the other photographs showed buildings and monuments: four of the Grand Hotel in Saratoga; four of the Mansion, Yaddo's fifty-five-room main building; dozens of historic New England churches and houses; and pictures of the graves of Hawthorne, Emerson, and Bronson Alcott.

Arvin's torments were not assuaged by his focus on the lives of others. During the nineteen-forties and early fifties, he tried at least three times to kill himself. One day, after watching young skaters on Smith's Paradise Pond, Arvin stumbled home, opened a bottle of liquor, put on a recording of John McCormack singing Hugo Wolf's setting of "Ganymed"—the Greek myth about a Trojan boy of great beauty who was carried away by Zeus to become cupbearer to the gods—and swallowed sixteen Nembutals. He was found the next morning by Aaron, who took him to the hospital, where his stomach was pumped.

In the summer of 1946, Arvin once again left Northampton for Yaddo, where he had been elected to the board of directors. Although his place in twentieth-century American letters was now secure, the war had reversed the country's political currents. Leftist writers, like Arvin, who had dreamed of an American Socialism, found themselves out of step and in retreat from the anti-Communist New Critics on the right. All this compounded Arvin's gloom. He had failed at marriage, was in anguish about his homosexuality, had become trapped at the edge of small-town life, and was now becoming a political pariah. As he prepared to leave his apartment, he wrote in his journal, "Woke again just after five. Thoughts of death and self-destruction. 'Morning tears.' "

TRUMAN CAPOTE also came to Yaddo that summer. Capote was twenty-four years Arvin's junior; blond, brash, and openly salacious, he was everything Arvin was not. Within days of their meeting, Arvin was writing to a friend that he had discovered "this Thing that one can surely expect but once or twice in a lifetime." Years later, Capote, in describing Arvin to his biographer Gerald Clarke, called his new friend a "charming person, cultivated in every way, with the most wonderfully subtle mind," and went on to say, "He was like a lozenge that you could keep turning to the light, one way or another, and the most beautiful colors would come out."

The two men became inseparable. At Yaddo, they ate lunch and dinner together, walked into town to the movies, took long moonlit walks around the grounds, and launched a three-year love affair that encompassed the happiest and most productive period of Arvin's life. When they were apart, they wrote each other letters every day—a passionate correspondence in which the staid Arvin even indulged in sexual joking: "LOST probably in Manhattan," he wrote from Northampton, "one peppermint-stick, beautifully pink and white, wonderfully straight, deliciously sweet. About a hand's length. Of great intrinsic and also sentimental value to owner." Arvin's shame about his sexuality seemed to melt in the younger man's flamboyant presence. As for Capote, he deepened and matured under Arvin's tutelage. Racing every second weekend by train from New York to Northampton, climbing the narrow stairs to Arvin's apartment on Prospect Street, he revelled in Arvin's donnish affection and, in the bargain, was given a crash course in the world's great books. Capote, who hadn't gone to college, would later say, "Newton was my Harvard."

Capote introduced Arvin to gay New York, with what were, occasionally, troubling results. Once, during an outing to Harlem for an annual drag dance at the Celebrity Club, a mostly gay dance hall, they were caught in what seemed to be a police raid. Arvin hid in a phone booth. After that, he insisted that Capote visit him more often in Northampton. For Capote,

NEVER
TESTED
ON
ANIMALS
KOREN

the demand was too confining, and it contributed to their eventual breakup. In Northampton, Arvin could lovingly show off Capote—his "Little T"—to close friends like some glittering jewel. But he knew that he could never be happy in the brightly lit public arena that Capote was headed for, even though that world offered him the promise of greater companionship than Northampton ever could.

During the years of his affair with Capote, Arvin began a biography of Herman Melville. Like his earlier books, it linked the themes of his own private life with that of his subject. Through his examination of Melville's work and life, and especially Melville's relationship with Hawthorne, Arvin found a way to express his secret life. He cited an essay in which Melville wrote, "It is that blackness in Hawthorne . . . that so fixes and fascinates me. Already I feel that [he] has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further and further, shoots his strong New England roots in the hot soil of my Southern soul." Arvin went on to observe, "It is an astonishingly sexual image, but probably only such an image could adequately have expressed Melville's feeling, for the moment, of receptiveness and even passivity in the acceptance of impregnation by another mind."

"Herman Melville" was a critical success, winning the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1951. Arvin was exultant. In his acceptance speech he celebrated Melville, who "spoke out for the 'august dignity' of the democratic man," and also Ralph Waldo Emerson, who "cried out, again and again, on behalf of the free spirit of man and against the brutal, power-hungry and inhumane forces that would enslave that spirit."

Reading "Herman Melville" today, I am struck by the book's quiet brilliance. Arvin was among the first academics who occupied themselves seriously with American literature, and his chapter on "Moby Dick" remains, almost fifty years later, a textbook example of learned, finely honed criticism. Everything is there—the great gusts of Melville's genius, Arvin's exquisite parsing of the multilayered text, the erudite references to Melville's most obscure sources. There is also something prescient and modern in Arvin's recognition that the Pequod's apocalyptic voyage might be the vengeance dream of a tormented, sexually injured, father-hating hero. Like Edmund Wilson and other literary critics of the era before deconstruction, Arvin was a master of discernment through descriptive fervor. He writes, "Ahab is what our wildest, most egoistic, most purely destructive malevolence could wish to be, this old Quaker skipper from Nantucket; obsessed to the point of monomania with the will to destroy the hated thing, yet free from all mere smallnesses, 'a grand, ungodly, godlike man.' He is our hatred ennobled, as we would wish to have it, up to heroism."

CAPOTE, with whom Arvin remained close, hoped that the success of the Melville book would enable Arvin to leave Smith. To David Lilienthal and his wife, Capote complained that Arvin was "surrounded by mediocrity" in Northampton and "ought to be at Harvard or Yale," but that he wouldn't "lift a finger to do anything for himself." Lilienthal promised to help, but there seems to have been little he could do, even after Arvin was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in 1952. The messy interruptions in Arvin's personal life—what Arvin called in his memoir the "crack-ups and breakdowns"—and the murmurs about his homosexuality had begun to trail him like a rap sheet. No élite men's college was likely to have him, no matter how distinguished his career. Besides, Arvin had become, as Aaron put it, "encysted" in Northampton—too settled, at fifty-two, in his small-town New England life, and too fearful of the outside world to live anywhere else.

After the Second World War, Arvin adapted himself to the new postwar conservatism, writing fewer pieces for *The Nation* and *The New Republic* and more pieces for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, which also happened to pay better. When the poet Robert Lowell, drinking heavily and on the verge of a nervous collapse, attacked Yaddo in 1949 as a center of Communism, Arvin took to his bed. "Got my will, the bonds, etc. out of safety deposit," he wrote portentously in his journal. Later, he joined Granville Hicks, Malcolm Cowley, and the board's other leftist critics in censuring Lowell, but he had learned to keep his politics vague. Years after the end of the McCarthy witch-hunt, Arvin was asked by Daniel Aaron, who was writing a book about the literary left, whether he had ever been a Communist. Arvin refused to answer, and his friend didn't press him.

Others, though, were less easily diverted. In 1954, Aloise Buckley Heath, a Smith graduate and a sister of William F. Buckley, Jr., formed a short-lived organization called the Committee for Discrimination in Giving, which appealed to alumnae to withhold donations until the college investigated alleged Communists on its faculty. The group's main targets were Arvin and four other professors. The college, conducting its own probe, contacted the U.S. Attorney General's office. Although Heath alleged that Arvin had been a member of more than fifteen Communist or

Communist-linked organizations, the Justice Department replied that there was "nothing of interest" in Arvin's file. Arvin panicked nonetheless. Four years earlier, under a similar threat, the brilliant Harvard professor Francis Otto Matthiessen—who was also a father of American studies, a homosexual, and a leftist—had put his affairs in order, rented a twelfth-floor room in a Boston commercial hotel, removed his Skull and Bones key from his pocket, left a note, and jumped to his death. Arvin successfully defended himself against Heath and her committee, but he was badly shaken by the ordeal. "Ghastly day . . . at night took two Nembutals and fell into oblivion," he wrote in his journal on April 2, 1954.

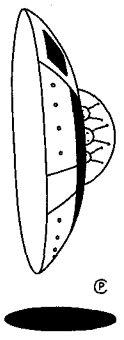
During the nineteen-fifties, it was easier to admit to being a Communist than to admit being a homosexual, and Arvin, who was doubly vulnerable, was doubly tormented. He tried to work, but what he called "the usual terrors" increasingly made reading and writing impossible. He began a biography of Emerson, but he was now so nearly paralyzed with loneliness and fear that he wrote nothing for long periods. He received electroshock therapy for depression, which helped slightly but also impaired his short-term memory, prompting him to complain to friends that the cure was worse than the disease. He was still a major figure at Smith and was still esteemed by many of the country's best writers, but the only place that he felt truly safe was in his apartment—his own "dismal chamber" under the eaves—where he often stayed for days, barely seeing anyone and frequently drinking himself into a stupor. Van Wyck Brooks had called Arvin "a quiet man with a violent mind" who "would gladly have stood against a wall and faced a fusillade for his convictions." Increasingly, however, his friends and colleagues found him dissolute and withdrawn. "Last night . . . up the odd Gothic blind stairwell to Arvin's for drinks," Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal in 1958, when she was earning extra money by grading exams for him. "Arvin: bald head pink, eyes and mouth dry slits as on some carved rubicund mask."

In his explanatory letter to Lilienthal after the arrest, Arvin referred obliquely to "all the behavior that led up to the crisis." From his journals, it seems clear that he was referring to upheavals in his private life that began in 1957. That fall, at the age of fifty-seven and lacking family and security, Arvin began to worry about his health and his capacity for intimacy. At the same time, Daniel Aaron recalls, his sexual appetites became more voracious. "He had a very driving, passionate sexual nature," Aaron said. "He used to say to me, 'You know, Dan, you'd think with old age sexual desires would subside. But they don't. They become more and more extreme, almost as if they were raging.' " In the prevailing view of the time, he had reached that reckoning, supposedly peculiar to the conspiratorial world of the homosexual, when debasement replaces mutuality, and desperation trumps precaution. The fact is, though, Arvin was the commonest of sufferers: an aging, single man looking for a young lover to rekindle his spirits.

IN late 1957, Arvin thought he had found one—a classics instructor at Smith named Ned Spofford, who, at twenty-six, was nearly half his age. "A pretty serious youth, but very likeable," Arvin wrote after their first meeting. If not quite "that Thing" which he had experienced with Capote, the relationship came close, at least for a time. "He fills my spirit too full for me to feel any other need. Have [I] ever cared for anyone more?" Arvin wrote in January of 1959. But the friendship with Spofford, while tender, never became sexual, and Arvin—"depressed beyond description"—compensated by indulging his taste for erotica and engaging in casual sex with partners he hardly knew. He called it "playing with deadly fire."

Arvin and Spofford saw each other nearly every day, with Arvin doing his best to hide his depression from Spofford—as he did from most of his friends—for fear he might drive the young man away. They read Propertius to each other in Latin. At times, Spofford came to Arvin's apartment to watch 8-mm. black-and-white films that Arvin liked to "run off" on his projector—tame movies of "two young guys wearing briefs tumbling over each other," Spofford told me recently. But Arvin began to worry more and more that he was too "dull and jaded" to hold Spofford's affections, as he noted in a typical journal entry from the middle of 1959:

> Ned and I have lunch at Rahar's, and he comes up later in the afternoon to borrow five dollars from me. We attempt in vain to run off a new movie. The projector fails to work. He tells me of his night in Springfield. Difficult to struggle against the suspicion that I am a convenience, in part, to be used as such. Not the whole truth, to be sure, but I am afraid too much of it. Inclined at such times to withdraw from all relations with anyone under forty.



By the spring of 1959, Arvin had managed to produce a truncated essay on Emerson, entitled "The House of Pain," for *The Hudson Review*. One of its central aims was to rescue the transcendentalist from what he elsewhere called "the great 'glad' glow of Emersonianism," by showing that his subject's relentless optimism "was somewhat less the product . . . of a natively happy temper than it was an achievement both of intellectual and emotional discipline." Some weeks after the appearance of this essay, he took the train to New York, checked into the Latham Hotel, on Twenty-eighth Street, and spent the next three nights at the Everard Baths. Situated on West Twenty-eighth Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, the Everard was renowned among homosexuals as a steamy arena for round-the-clock sex. It was unforgettably described by Ned Rorem in his "New York Diary":

> You enter at any age, in any condition, any time of night or week, pay dearly for a fetid cubicle, and are given a torn gown and a pair of mismated slippers (insufficient against the grime that remains in your toes for days). You penetrate an obscure world, disrobe in private while reading graffiti, emerge rerobed into the public of gray wanderers so often compared to the lost souls of Dante.

After staying all night at the Everard, Arvin rested up, then visited a museum or two or stopped briefly in the West Village to buy books and erotica. Because he worried increasingly about receiving sexual materials through the mail, his New York trips doubled as shopping excursions. Sylvan Schendler, who taught with Arvin at Smith, remembered picking him up after a few nights at the baths and asking him how it went. "Oh, Sylvan," he'd say, "I feel so clean."

Approaching the summer of 1960, Arvin found himself in "the pit." Nervous about an abscess on his thigh, which he feared he had developed after an anonymous tryst, he swore off cruising. "This must be the last such jaunt for many weeks," he reproved himself in his journal after a fruitless afternoon at the nearby Springfield bus station. His distaste for teaching, which had always been a frustration, ripened into disgust. He wrote, "Reading student papers, blue books, etc., a form of torture . . . a matter of rubbing an iron file over one's teeth, or holding urine in one's mouth, or having the racket of a bulldozer in one's ear for an hour or two on end." Also troubling was the Presidential race between John Kennedy, a staunch Irish Catholic and Cold Warrior, and "that paltry Richard Nixon," as Arvin called him, who had built his political career by attacking all forms of deviance. Congress had given Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield sweeping powers to crack down on what Summerfield called "pornographic filth in the family mailbox." Massachusetts had recently elevated possession of obscene material from a misdemeanor to a felony and had increased the maximum penalty from two years in jail to five years in a state prison. "Almost impossible to contemplate the political scene, the vulgar conventions and the like, without revulsion," Arvin wrote in his journal.

THE raid on Arvin's apartment was led by Sergeant John J. Regan, a blunt-spoken Irish-Catholic state trooper, who had recently been named to head the state's new anti-pornography

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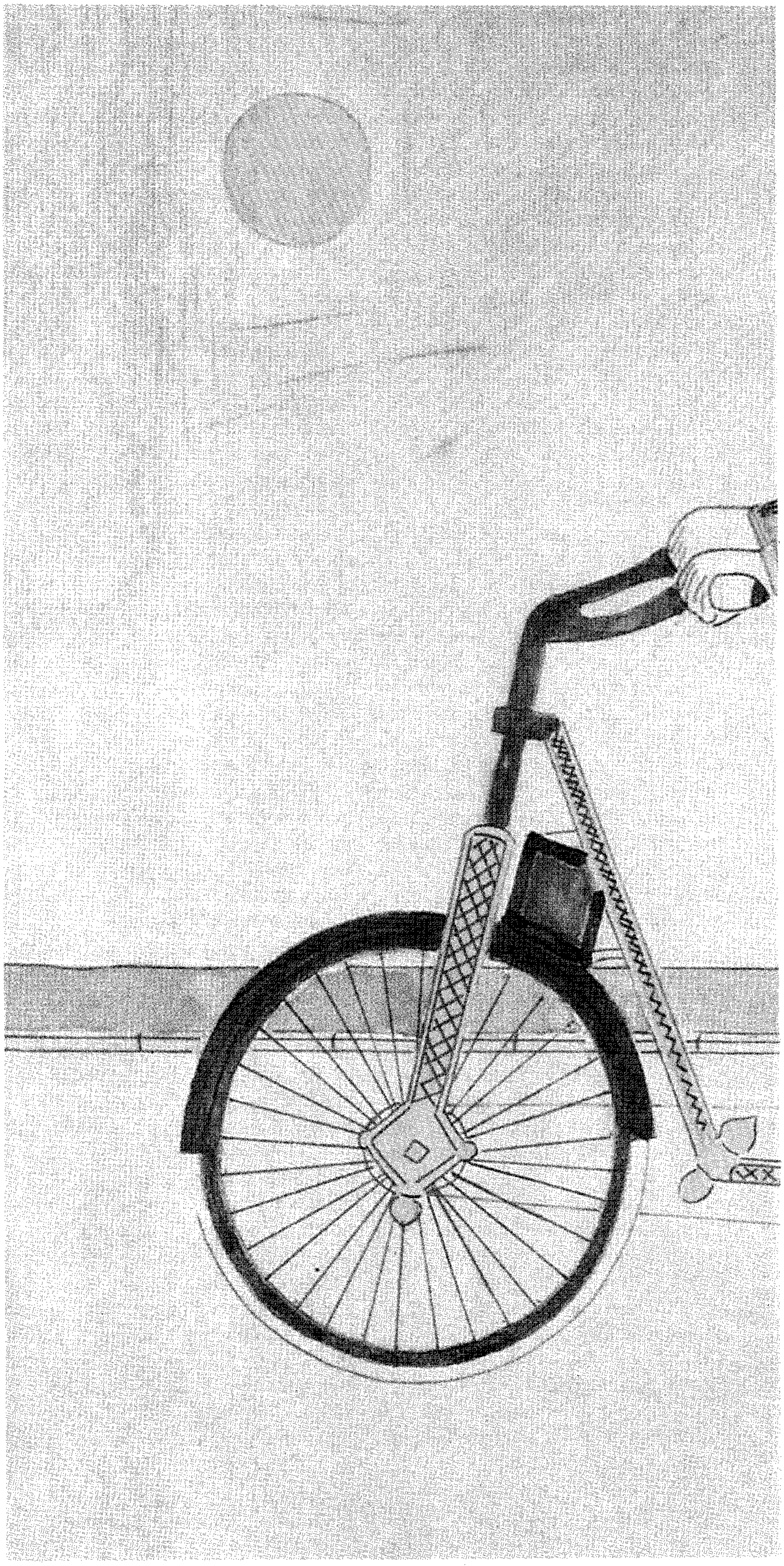
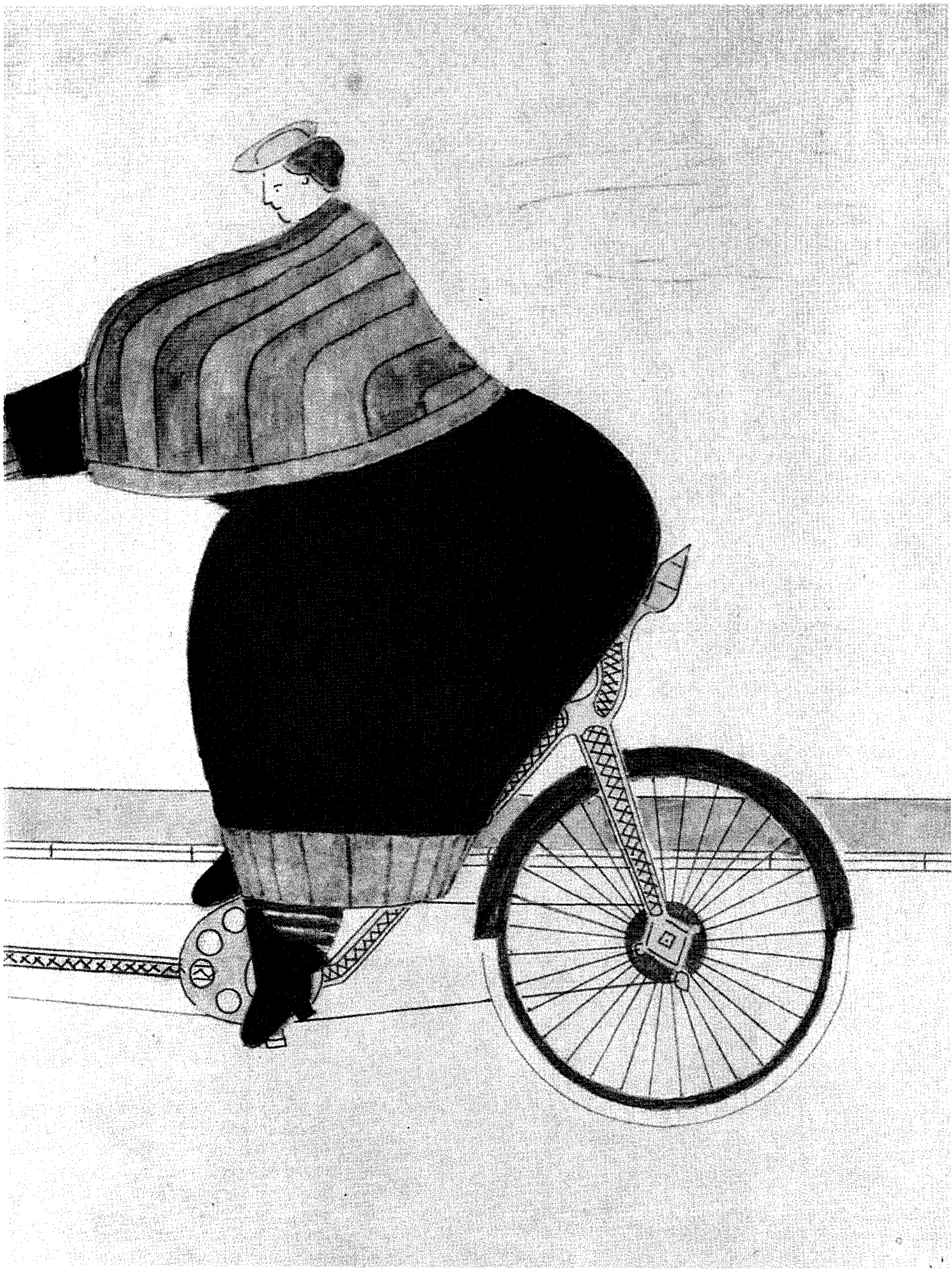
PSYCHOGRAPHS

Early this century, a German psychiatrist named Hans Prinzhorn amassed a collection of five thousand paintings, collages, drawings, and sculptures made by inmates of European asylums. His book "The Artistry of the Insane" appeared in 1922, on the eve of Surrealism, and the dreamlike confusions of the art fascinated innovators like Paul Klee and Oskar Schlemmer. During the Nazi era, however, the works (along with most of modern art at the time) were branded "degenerate," and it was not until two years ago, at the Hayward Gallery in London, that the Prinzhorn Collection received a full public viewing. The exhibition catalogue, "Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis" (University of California), published in the United States last month, includes this untitled watercolor of an unlikely bicyclist made by Karl Gustav Sievers, a weaver, during his stay in the Göttingen asylum, sometime after 1909. The artist suffered from schizophrenia.





PRINZHORN-SAMMLUNG DER PSYCHIATRISCHEN UNIVERSITÄTSKLINIK HEIDELBERG (INV. 4332D)

bureau—reputedly the first such unit in the country. Regan brought a soul saver's zeal to his mission, which had netted approximately fifty arrests since its inception, four months earlier. According to press accounts of the time, Regan received a tip either from alert postal workers, who claimed that a package addressed to Arvin had broken open to reveal homoerotic pictures, or from officials in Missouri, where a raid on a pornographic mail-order house had yielded a mailing list that had Arvin's name on it. In the course of ransacking Arvin's apartment, Regan's men, according to *Newsweek*, "half filled a patrol car" with evidence.

Arvin had always thought of himself as something of a coward, yet he possessed an inner steel, as was demonstrated by his extraordinary confidence in his literary judgments and by his handwriting, which was bold and slashing. Deferential and courteous in his professional relationships, he could also, according to Aaron, be "remorselessly selfish" in his private ones—for example, in his dependency on others for meals and transportation, since he seldom cooked and couldn't drive. Arvin was a survivor. Whenever he tried to kill himself, he had always managed to be discovered. He was not the type to risk success by leaping, like Matthiessen, from a twelfth-floor window.

Arvin dealt with his crisis just as he must have feared that he would and hoped that he wouldn't. He gave the police the names of a Smith colleague, Joel Dorius, an associate professor of English, and of fourteen other male acquaintances. It remains unclear whether he also gave Spofford's name to Regan or whether the investigators discovered it simply by reading his journals. In any case, after leaving Arvin at the police station Regan sent two patrolmen to Spofford's apartment. They were sorting through the young instructor's collection of erotic pictures when Spofford came home. He was brought to police headquarters, arrested, and locked in the same cell as Arvin. Recalling the event nearly forty years later, Spofford told me, "Newton suggested that we commit suicide together. I emphatically said no."

Later that afternoon, after making bail with money borrowed from friends, Arvin admitted himself to Northampton State Hospital—Dippy Hill, as the Smith undergraduates called it.

CAPOTE, who was living on the Mediterranean coast of Spain and working on "In Cold Blood," wrote to Arvin within hours of hearing the news:

> Well, what's happened has happened; and it has happened to many others—who, like Gielgud, took it in stride and did not let it be the end of the world. [In 1953, John Gielgud was arrested for "persistently importuning male persons" on the streets of London's Chelsea.] . . . Aside from my affection, which you already have, I will be *glad* to supply you with money should the need arise. This is a tough experience, and must be met with toughness; a calm head, a good lawyer.

Lillian Hellman, who had refused to name names during the Hollywood Red hunts, wrote to Arvin:

> I would like to do anything I could, anything. And I hope you feel friendly enough toward me to tell me what I could do. . . . Please don't feel too bad. That sounds silly, but please don't. There was [a] time when I thought the world had gone to pieces for me, but it didn't, and it's our duty to see that it doesn't. Just you be very sure that many, many people admire you and respect you.

These calls for toughness seemed aimed at keeping Arvin from killing himself, but apparently he was never placed on suicide watch in the hospital, and his earliest letters from the institution reveal an oddly upbeat sense of resignation. "Life here . . . is very tolerable—with some really good personal relations,

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO TED HUGHES'S "BIRTHDAY LETTERS"

1.
Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
Not past a thing. Not understanding or telling
Or forgiveness.
But often past oneself,
Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs
In language that can still knock language sideways.

2.
I read it quickly, then stood looking back
As if it were a bridge I had passed under—
So intimate in there, the tremor-drip
And cranial acoustic of the stone
With its arch-ear to the ground, a listening post
Open to the light, to the *limen* world
Of soul on its lonely path, the railway lines
Shining in silence, the railway child in me
Stepped in so deep in unshadowed apprehension
I felt like one come out of an upper room
To fret no more and walk abroad confirmed.

3.
Passive suffering: who said it was disallowed
As a theme for poetry? Already in "Beowulf"
The dumbfounding of woe, the stunt and stress
Of hurt-in-hiding is the best of it—

As when King Hrethel's son accidentally kills
His older brother and snaps the grief-trap shut
On Hrethel himself, wronged father of the son
Struck down, honor bound to exact
The death price from his own surviving son—

And the poet draws from his word hoard a weird tale
Of a balked life and love, which I reword here
Remembering night tremors once on Dartmoor,

The power station wailing in its pit
Under the heath, as if Lear's breaking heart
And Cordelia's breaking silence called to you,
Chooser of poem light, ploughshare of fields unsunned.

4.
"It was like the misery endured by an old man
Who has lived to see the body of his son
Swing on the gallows. He begins to keen
And weep for his boy, watching the black raven
Gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help.
The wisdom of his years is worthless to him.
Morning after morning he wakes to remember
That his child has gone; he has no more interest
In living on until another heir
Is born in the hall, now that his firstborn
Has departed through the door of death forever.
He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,
The banquet hall bereft of all delight,
The windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are sleeping,
The warriors under ground; what was is no more.
No tunes from the harp, no cheering in the yard.
Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed
And sings a dirge, suddenly without joy
In his steadings and wide fields.
                                        Such were the woes
And pains of loss that the lord of the Geats endured
After Herebeald's death. The king was helpless
To set to right the wrong that had been committed."

5.
Soul has its scruples. Things not to be said.
Things for keeping, that can keep the small hours' gaze
Open and steady. Things for the *aye* of God
And for poetry. Which is, as Milosz says,
"A dividend from ourselves," a tribute paid
By what we have been true to. A thing allowed.

—Seamus Heaney

as always—and I am, I believe, reasonably calm and fatalistic," he wrote to Granville Hicks. "Good may somehow emerge from all this distress, and my own personal fortune is of minor importance, even I think to me."

Arvin's equanimity collapsed after his court appearance. Convicted and fined twelve hundred dollars, he was now a felon. Three weeks later, at Dorius's trial, he testified against his colleague. (Both Dorius and Spofford were eventually acquitted on appeal.) Arvin felt too mortified and too afraid to go out, but he couldn't bear to be alone in his violated apartment. He returned to the hospital.

"Dear Spike," he wrote despairingly to Leonard Ehrlich, a New York novelist who was an old friend, "it is all but impossible to write to you as I should like to do; I am really too dazed and benumbed to express myself properly. . . . The torment of thinking what this has done to other people is inexpressible . . . am holding on grimly." Helen Bacon, then the head of the classics department at Smith, who sold her war bonds to organize a defense fund for Spofford and Dorius, recalls Arvin's enveloping shame: "He thought he was wicked."

What saved him, as the Smith trustees voted to retire him at half salary (fifty-eight hundred dollars a year), was the encouragement he received from his celebrated friends. Letters of support continued to pour in: from Lionel Trilling, Carson McCullers, even the homophobic Van Wyck Brooks. Like Capote, David Lilienthal made repeated offers of money, and Arvin accepted them, while proudly insisting that the gifts be regarded as loans. In late November, a few weeks after he left the hospital for a second time, he heard from Edmund Wilson:

> I hope that this episode will not discourage you but perhaps in the long run prove stimulating. It will not detract in the least from your literary reputation. If it is impossible now for you to teach at Smith, you ought not to have any difficulty in publishing reviews and articles. Would you like me to speak to *The New Yorker* and [*The*] *Nation*. I have always thought you didn't write half enough. . . . Goddam all this interference with people's personal affairs!

Arvin replied:

> I feel very much as if I had been involved in a violently destructive automobile accident that had no intelligible meaning, only a shattering one.

Arvin hoped that Hicks and others could arrange for him to spend a quiet winter at Yaddo; the Yaddo administration replied that he was welcome but requested his resignation from the board of directors. Arvin was devastated.

He returned to the state hospital for a third time on December 2, 1960. As had happened previously, he was assigned to the newest building, a low-slung three-story red brick box with locked wards and barred windows, and there he was surrounded by shuffling, chain-smoking, mostly indigent new patients—all of them male, in obedience to the hospital's policy of separating patients by sex. Former staff members remember Arvin as extremely quiet and refined, always impeccably groomed and dressed, although his belt and ties had been taken from him. He kept to himself, asking for little, socializing with two or three other patients who made him feel comfortable. "He wouldn't get any judgment here," Pat Carr, a nursing supervisor, recalls. "He was just accepted for what he was."

Two weeks later, he emerged from the hospital, somewhat strengthened. In January, a month after his discharge, he wrote to Hicks:

> I have ventured more and more into public places, including the college library, and though it is painful enough sometimes, I gain a little strength by doing so. So far as I can intuit peoples' attitudes, they are mostly friendly or at least tolerant: I have not yet encountered any real rebuff anywhere, and some people have gone out of their way to be kind—sometimes surprising people. So in one sense I may "live it down" ultimately—though in another sense, subjectively, I never can. The imagery for a nightmare will always be there.

At the end of January, Arvin returned to the hospital once again, too depressed to receive visitors. His handwriting—which always clearly marked the degree of his resolve—was shaky and barely legible. "I am sorry to be (or rather seem) so unfriendly and unhospitable now but I am in the hospital again and feeling too miserable to talk," he wrote to Ehrlich. He scarcely felt better two months later, when he wrote, again to Ehrlich, about his disappointment at having the first book review he'd been able to write since his arrest rejected by *Commentary:*

> I have little or no news beyond this. I get through the days as best I can, seeing almost no one and reading until the pages swim before my eyes. I hardly know how the time passes but looking back on it, as usual, it seems to have flown. . . . I need you worse than ever.

BUT as long as Arvin worked, he could keep going. He began a critical biography of Longfellow, whose poetry he had first read fifty years earlier, and, to his surprise, he was able to write well and cleanly and without a trace of bitterness. By July, he had written the first chapter and he could even cluck dismissively at people who might be outwardly tougher than he but had lost the will to soldier on. He wrote to Hicks:

> Hemingway's suicide knocked me for a loop when I read of it, and has haunted me ever since. Yet in a sense it was a characteristic and almost a predictable thing for him to do, wasn't it? That lifelong preoccupation with death.

By the following fall, Arvin—like his hero, Emerson—had discovered the great healing force of optimism as a moral imperative, a necessary antidote to the pain of American life. "Things are a little less bleak, now that college has begun," he wrote to Ehrlich in late September of 1961. He added, "I have long since found that, little as one may like it, one can *live* through ages of loneliness. What has kept me sane, perhaps, is that, to my delight, I have found that I can *work.*"

"He was at the flood tide of his energy and power; never more enthusiastic about what he planned to do, or more eager to set about doing it," the critic Louis Kronenberger recalled of Arvin.

"I give you a fifty-fifty chance. Pay me up front, and I'll make it sixty-forty."

One of Arvin's closest friends, Madeline Fisher, told me, "Nobody could do anything that would hurt him anymore. The blows had been dealt."

Arvin seldom left his apartment except to go to the library. He worked hard on his Longfellow book and on his memoir; read voraciously, not only in English but also in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Latin; and plotted several new projects, including an ambitious history of literary ideas in America. The fact that he had brought trouble to his friends seemed no longer to plague him, nor did he acknowledge responsibility for their suffering. He mourned his estrangement from Spofford, but coldly, numbly, without remorse, as he noted in a letter to Hicks in 1962:

> You have no doubt heard the news of Ned's acquittal by the state court. . . . Of course it is wonderfully good news, and I "really" rejoice. But I was shocked at myself to find how little, honestly, it really elated me. I *knew* that it was a happy fact, but somehow I could hardly *feel* anything. Perhaps my capacity for feeling, at least in that connection, is frozen once for all. And there is the thought that, acquitted or not, Ned will never be the same person again that he was before; that he will be lamed by the whole ghastly episode for life; and that our really exquisite friendship was utterly annihilated by it.

Arvin's health problems—always a worry—persisted throughout the Kennedy years. Prostate surgery resulted in months of painful incontinence. In the middle of 1962, he finished "Longfellow." Then, in early 1963, he was found to have pancreatic cancer. Arvin didn't complain, nor did he seem dismayed. Perhaps, as some of his friends surmised, he felt that he deserved the disease as a form of punishment. Again, he seems to have been well prepared. He had written Daniel Aaron a decade earlier:

> The *staple* of life is certainly suffering, though surely not its real meaning; and we differ mainly in our capacity to endure it—or to be diverted from it. I myself never found it consoling to have this denied or minimized; it seems to me to give one *some* strength just to know that pain is normal, and disappointment the rule, and disquiet the standard—and that the things that have the other quality (work, friendship, the arts) are the wonderful, incredible exceptions and mitigation.

Arvin lived just long enough to see "Longfellow" published and to have the pleasure of reading Edmund Wilson's glowing review, in *The New Yorker.* Wilson wrote, "Among the writers who have really devoted their lives to the study of our literature . . . I can think of only two who can themselves be called first-rate writers: Van Wyck Brooks and Newton Arvin." In the days before Arvin died, on March 21, 1963, in Northampton's Cooley Dickinson Hospital, he studiously excised with a razor dozens of potentially embarrassing passages from his journal. Shortly before his death, Capote telephoned him, for the last time. Arvin consoled him with the remark "Never mind, at least I've grown up at last."

Twenty-one years later, Capote died, leaving a will that established that an annual award for excellence in literary criticism be given "in memory of Newton Arvin."

THE deep, clipped voice of Joel Dorius sounded frail when I reached him, not long ago, by phone at his home, in San Francisco. He is seventy-nine, has retired from teaching English literature, and is crippled by intractable back pains that have left him housebound since the eighties. When I asked him how Arvin's betrayal had affected him, he told me that after thirty-four years of being so filled with hate that he felt "numb" he had begun to write an autobiography, and it was now nearly finished. "I've been plunged back into the white-hot cauldron," he said.

When I first approached Dorius for an interview, he had been reluctant to talk. He told me that he was worried about reopening old wounds and was nervous that I would preëmpt the material in his book. He changed his mind when I mentioned that Arvin's last years had been not grim but productive.

"That that strange, mysterious, bland man had become so serene and happy was absolutely unthinkable to me," he said in a subsequent telephone conversation. Dorius's fall, unlike Arvin's after the crisis, had been uncushioned. He had refused to inform on friends, and—along with Spofford—he was fired from Smith. Dorius told me that, because of the disgrace, he had felt forced to leave the United States; he had taught in Germany for two years before returning to finish his career, at San Francisco State College. He said that he had been hospitalized for depression in 1961. Nearly forty years after the event, his rage at Arvin was undiminished. In a halting voice, he said, "His being so very chipper and hale after he did us in . . . I can't imagine anyone that morally neutral, or detached from life."

Ned Spofford, who agreed to an interview by phone and correspondence, told me a slightly different story. He is sixty-seven, and he lives in Palo Alto, an hour from his close friend Dorius. Whereas Dorius was in mid-career at the time of their arrest, Spofford was twenty-nine, and was more resilient—or so it seemed. He left Northampton for further graduate studies, at Harvard, then studied classical poetry in Rome for two years on a fellowship. From 1964 to 1971, he taught at Cornell and received tenure, but he found Ithaca so lonely that he moved to San Francisco. Until his retirement in 1988, he was a classics professor at Stanford.

Like Dorius, Spofford told me that he had tried to put the past behind him by maintaining a public silence about the Arvin affair. Like Dorius, he had been hospitalized—in his case, three times—for depression. But Spofford didn't seem to share his friend's bitterness. In a letter to me, he wrote, "Joel tends to speak in the plural: 'It devastated our lives, and that's that.' It didn't devastate my life. With a lot of help from friends, before and after The Event, I have had a fairly happy life."

Even today, he has continued to cling to the belief that his was not among the names that Arvin gave to the police. "I suppose I've just tried not to think about it," he said. Spofford added that when Arvin was dying, he had had a friend write to Spofford, asking the younger man to call him. At the time, Spofford had been too angry to pick up the phone, but he didn't feel that way anymore. When I pressed him on the matter, Spofford replied, simply, "Newton and I were each other's closest friend." ♦

Handelsman

"This time, I'm afraid it's serious. He just met a girl named Maria."

• •

SHOWCASE BY ROBERT POLIDORI

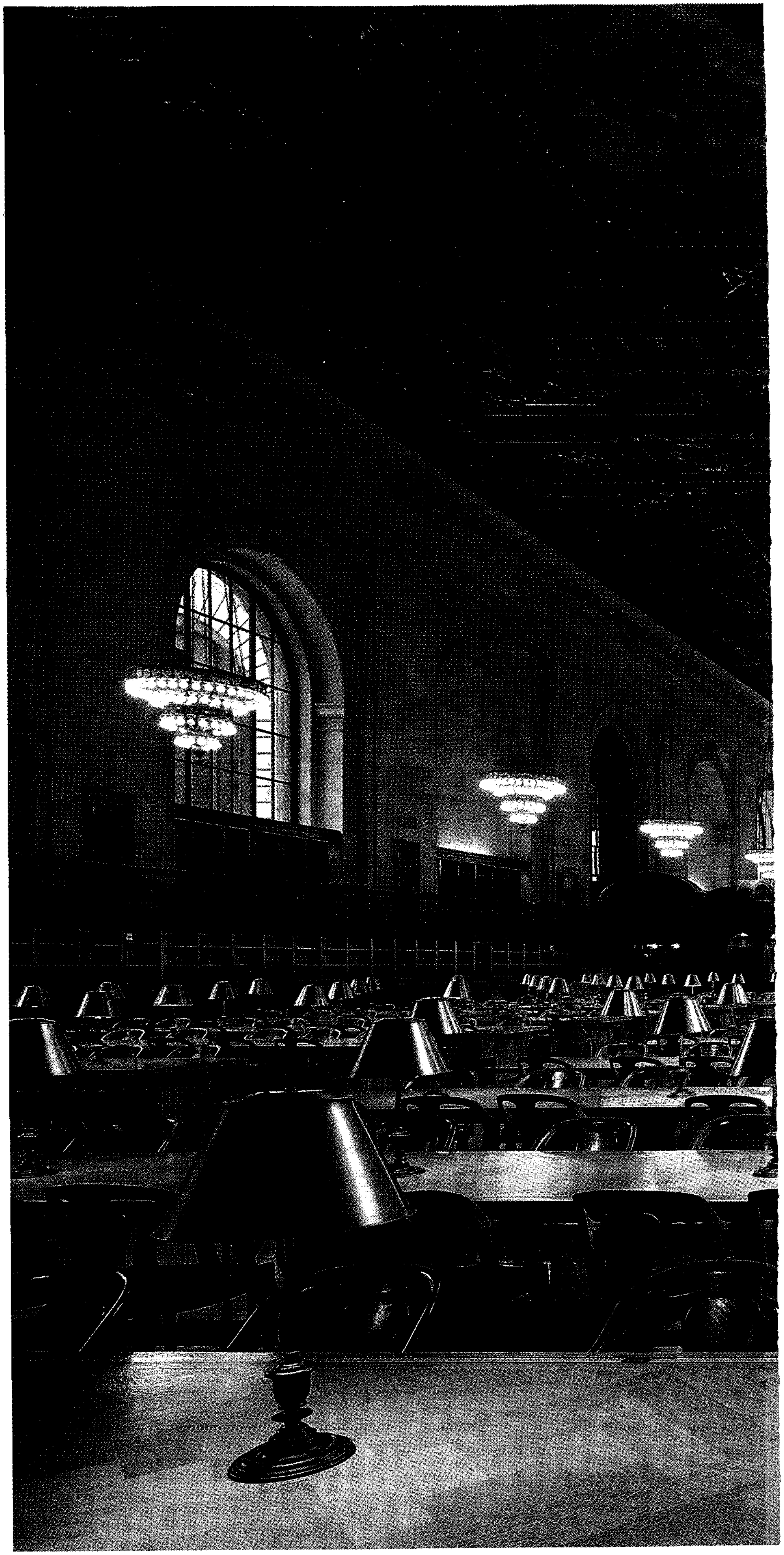
ROOM TO THINK

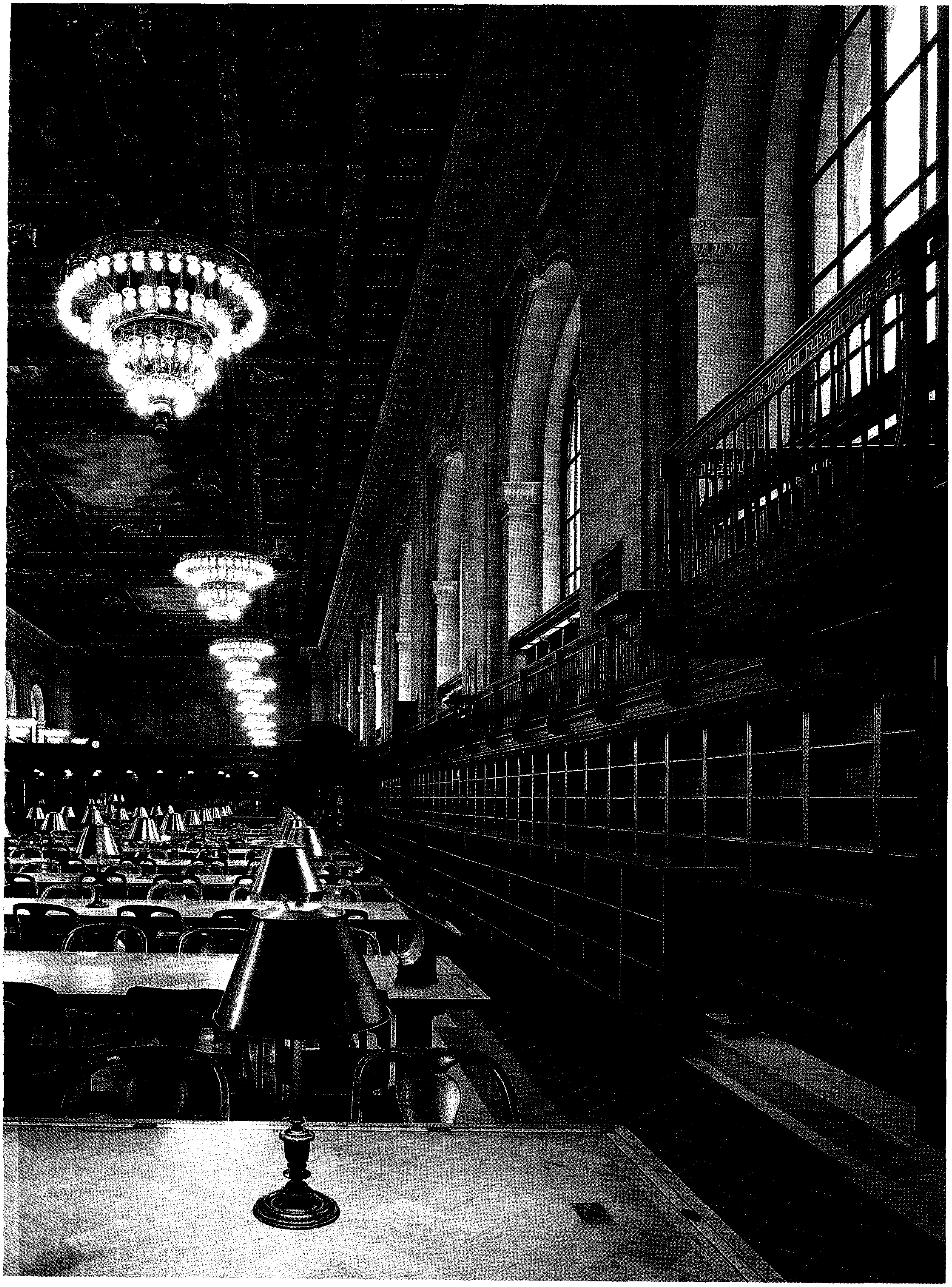
PUBLIC grandeur for the most solitary of pursuits: that is the paradox, and the glory, of the Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library. In most majestic Beaux-Arts buildings—train stations, opera houses, concert halls, courthouses—crowds are an essential part of the experience that the architecture was created for. But here, in this room that is almost as long as a football field, every scholar is alone, in silence, connected to the world via his books or—now that the room has been wired for the information age—his computer.

What else in New York is at once huge, full, and quiet? One of the cathedrals, perhaps, but the Main Reading Room could not be more different. At the library, there are no reverent hymns, no creeds, no dogma. Everyone pursues his own truth; it is the job of this architecture not to send us in a particular direction but to serve each user's quest to find his own answers. The architects John M. Carrère and Thomas Hastings, who designed the building at the turn of the century, offered up dignity, order, sumptuousness, and glorious natural light as a backdrop for all kinds of thinking.

Lewis Davis, of Davis Brody Bond, who has overseen the shining restoration of the library, has taken that concept further, updating Carrère & Hastings's exquisite and ornate architecture while subtly inserting the latest technology. (Wiring for computers is slid up through the pedestals of the original reading-room tables.) The room, which is now called the Deborah, Jonathan F.P., Samuel Priest, and Adam Raphael Rose Main Reading Room, is thus a metaphor for an ideal city—a place that incorporates change while holding on to everything that made it so beloved, a place where a wildly diverse group of inhabitants are thrown together within something vast and monumental and left to achieve their private goals, communally.

—PAUL GOLDBERGER





PERSONAL HISTORY

GOOD RAYMOND

When the author was introduced to Raymond Carver twenty-one years ago, he couldn't have known that he had just met the man who would soon be the most celebrated short-story writer in the world.

BY RICHARD FORD

I MET Raymond Carver in the fall of 1977, not really so long ago, although of course almost half of that time he's been gone. We met at one of those semi-fancy literary festivals that still take place in American universities. A mixed group of writers—poets and prosers—get themselves invited to a college campus (in this case it was S.M.U., in Dallas). Public readings go on every evening, panel discussions, classes with students in the afternoons, late nights in the Hilton Hotel bar with pals, occasionally some low-grade high jinks, nothing too serious—all of it on the cuff. It's what occupies the space of a literary life outside of New York.

Ray and I were lesser lights in a larger group that included Philip Levine and E. L. Doctorow—distinct literary stars, even then. A friend of ours at S.M.U. had included us on the "faculty" as a way of putting some money in our pockets and giving us some needed exposure. I had published a novel the year before, to no special acclaim. Ray had published his first collection of stories, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," which had been nominated for the National Book Award.

I can honestly say I didn't know who Raymond Carver was at the time. That his name would become a household word in the next ten years, his stories a standard for the form, and he himself elevated to the station of "the American Chekhov" did not seem quite evident then. (It's difficult, of course, to re-create the condition of not knowing once experience has made so much known. It is, though, a phenomenon writers all puzzle about as we try to make made-up experience seem real.)

It's possible I'd heard the name Ray Carver before, knew of some wild and woolly literary drinking episodes in the Bay Area or Iowa City, two places I knew little of. (I, improbably enough, lived in Princeton.) But I'm certain I hadn't read a Carver story. I was thirty-three, and Ray was vaguely thirty-nine. Neither of us had much gotten our head up out of the foggy ether young writers live in—sometimes for years, sometimes forever—in which you're indistinctly aware of a "writing world," conscious of a few names on its periphery, a few stories, an occasional significant breakthrough into print, but mostly are just beavering away trying to make isolation and persistence into a virtue, and anonymity your sneak attack on public notice.

I say this last because Ray and I were so typical of Americans who decide to try being writers, and were products of the environment that included college, writing workshops, sending stories to quarterlies, attending graduate school, having teachers who were writers—Doctorow had been one of mine—all of us seeking improvement in the standard postwar American way: through some form of pedagogy. Ray had been to Iowa and to Stanford. I had been to U.C. Irvine. I had an M.F.A.; Ray *said* he had one, though in fact he hadn't stayed around long enough. But we had entered the writing world by that institutional means, just as Flannery O'Connor and Tennessee Williams did years before, and that way was moving us along, giving us walls to reach out and touch until we could put up some persuasive edifices of our own with what we wrote.

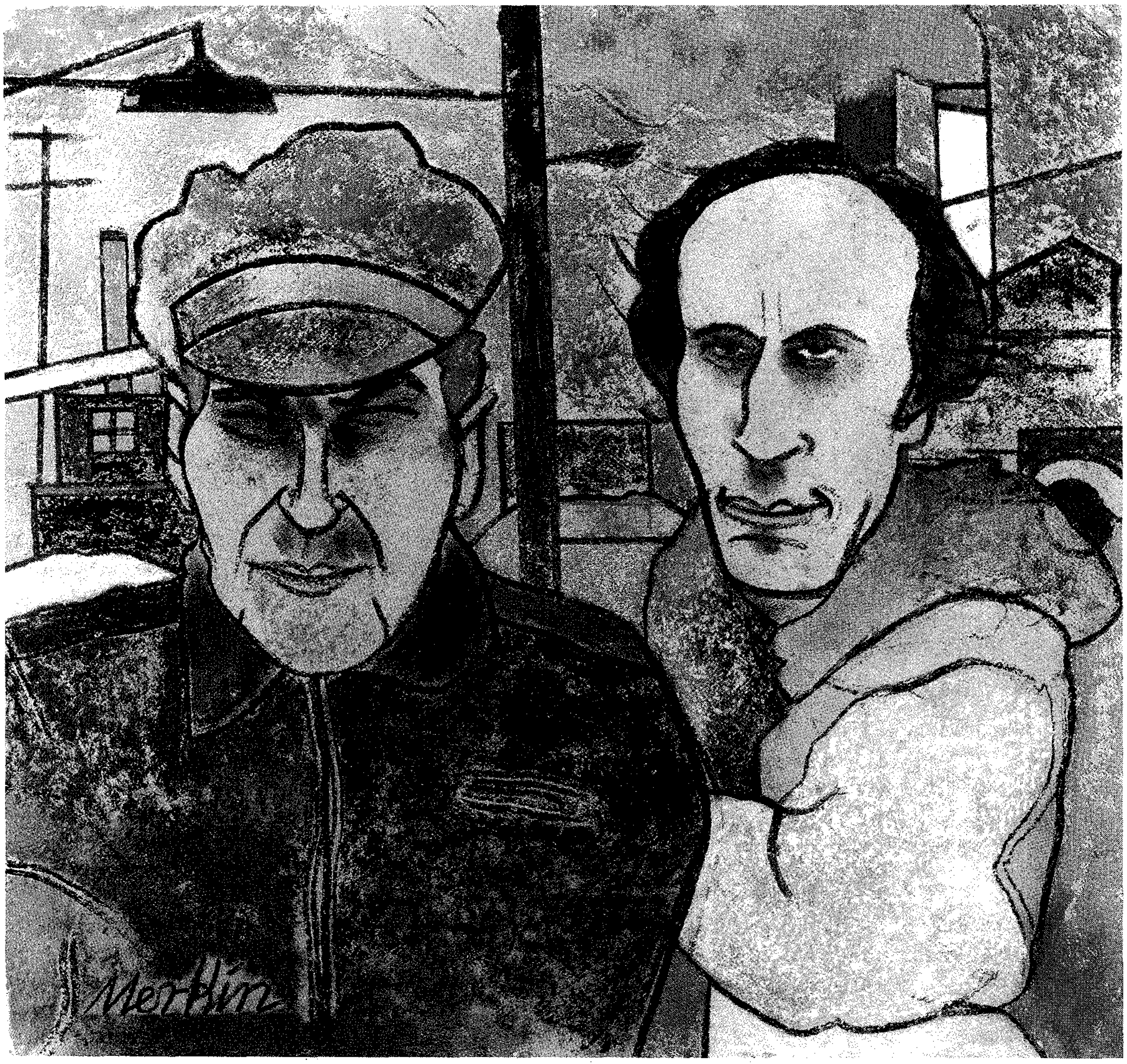
In 1977, Ray was married, had two teen-age kids, and was not long off booze—a year and a half, which people who know say is entry-level for staying sober. Indeed, the first thing I remember hearing about Ray that week in Dallas, even before I laid eyes on him, was that he'd been deep in the drink for a long time, had tried to quit over and over, had finally got sober in A.A. but was a solid risk to fall off again. Inviting him to your writers' festival, to teach at your college, to borrow your car, to house-sit your apartment, to walk your dog around the block would be dicey business.

I don't remember the exact moment we met, although I retain a picture of me shaking hands with Ray in some big glassy hotel lobby where a crowd of people are all wearing paper nametags. I do, however, remember who he was then, how he seemed. Later he would look like the warm-and-substantial guy in the Marion Ettlinger photograph—large, well groomed, handsome and tanned, rugged-featured in an almost Indian way, and sporting a good haircut. But in 1977 he was tall, skinny, and bony, hesitant, barely speaking above a clipped whisper. He seemed friendly but slightly spooked, though not in a way that spooked you; more in a way that suggested he'd recently been on the ropes and definitely didn't want to show up there again. His teeth needed work. His hair was dense and practically matted. He had rough hands, long fat sideburns, black horn-rimmed spectacles, a pair of mustard-colored trousers, an ugly brown-and-purple striped shirt from Penney's basement, and a taste in footwear that ran to Hush Puppies knockoffs. He looked as if he'd stepped down off a Greyhound bus from 1964, and from someplace where he'd done mostly custodial duties. And he was completely irresistible.

I'm a man whose externalities in the world are never far from my notice. I'm a white-buck Southerner, a former fraternity member, a perennial job applicant. I like certain kinds of clothes. Cotton this, cotton that. Nice shined loafers, natural shoulders for my jackets. It's a look.

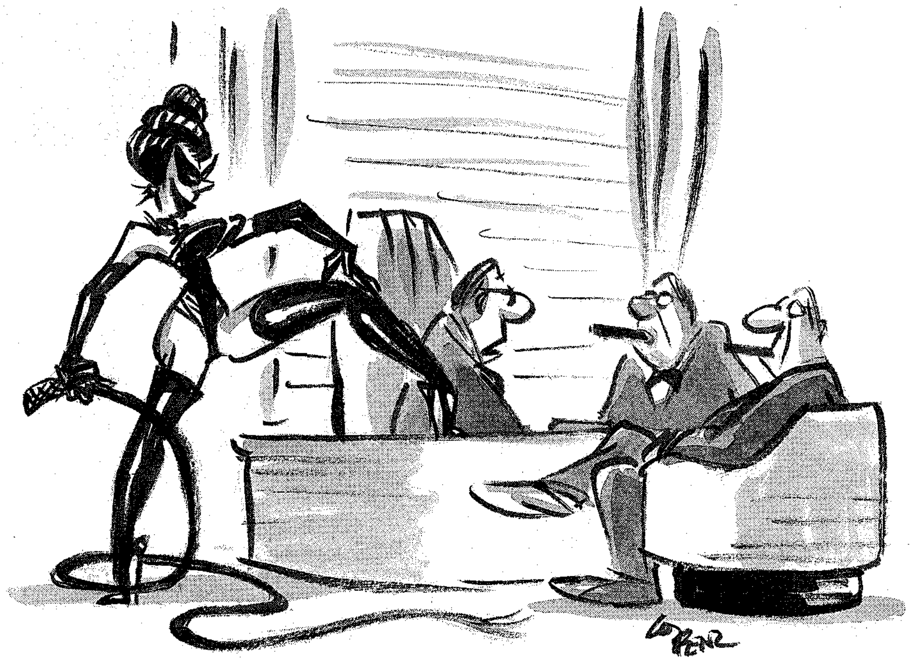
Ray was my opposite, at least in appearance: a man who truly had other things on his mind. Ray Carver was hungry in 1977, and not for a square meal. You could also say he looked haunted. Bad things were not very far behind him, and he meant to be watchful. He laughed hurriedly, then slipped back into a kind of serious but uncertain reserve. His eyes darted a little. His big shoulders were slightly hunched. He seemed to want to come near you, to agree with you about something important you and he knew together, something literary, if possible—admiration for somebody's book or poem—but not to come all the way to you. "Yes, yes, oh yes. Oh by God I couldn't agree more." His voice was hoarse, deep. His eyes would move away but find you again, as if he were testing something—your opinion of *him*. He seemed vulnerable, good. And everything—his clothes, his hands, his hair (if you put your hands on his shoulders, as we all did a lot then, and drew close)—*everything* smelled like smoke. Though everything did *not* smell like booze. Booze was over.

The night I met Ray he gave a reading in some big, cold and barny, echoing multipurpose room on the S.M.U. campus. Other people, even if I didn't, seemed to know who Raymond Carver was, because lots of them turned up to listen. Ray read a story that was then called "What Is It?" and that is still my favorite. (Later, an overweening editor convinced Ray to call it "Are These Actual Miles?"—a terrible title for giving away the story's keystone line.) The story concerns a couple on the brink of bankruptcy and dispossession who decide to sell their prized convertible (an emblem of palmier times) before whoever is going to foreclose or serve papers or slap a lien on them arrives at the door. *She* leaves to do the selling. *He* stays home, full of apprehension and loathing, drinking Scotch. The story, which is from "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," is shockingly brief—ten pages in my Vintage edition—especially in view of the broad emotional distances it traverses while still being full of memorable moments and lines. In the passage of an afternoon and evening, a man's entire spiritual life is laid bare then bludgeoned in ways that make the reader both laugh and cringe: his marriage is possibly sacrificed to hardship; he is almost certainly cuckolded by a used-car dealer his wife has only that



Raymond Carver and Richard Ford in 1984: They shared the same world view, a kind of Prairie Existentialism—that who you loved mattered, that kids were a mixed blessing, and that bad luck lurked everywhere.

RICHARD MERKIN



"Ms. Stottlemeyer is my personal organizer."

• •

night become acquainted with; great fury and indignation are fruitlessly unleashed; his wife's distaste for him is revealed. And, of course, his car is sold.

Ray read the story in near-dark conditions, hugely hunched over a glaring little podium lamp, constantly fiddling with his big glasses, clearing his throat, sipping water, beetling down at the pages of his book as if he'd never really thought of reading this story out loud and wasn't finding it easy. His voice was typically hushed, seemingly unpracticed, halting almost to the point of being annoying. But the effect of voice and story upon the listener was of actual life being unscrolled in a form so distilled, so intense, so *chosen*, so affecting in its urgencies as to leave you breathless and limp when he was finished. It was a startling experience—wondrous in all ways. And one learned, from the story, many things: Life was this way—yes, we already knew that. But *this* life, *these* otherwise unnoticeable people's suitability for literary expression seemed new. One also felt that a consequence of the story was seemingly to intensify life, even dignify it, and to locate in it shadowed corners and niches that needed revealing so that we readers could practice life better ourselves. And yet the story itself, in its spare, self-conscious intensity, was such a *made* thing, not *like* life at all; it was a piece of nearly abstract artistic construction calculated to produce almost giddy pleasure. That night in Dallas, Ray put on a blatant display of what a story could do in terms of artifice, concision, strong feeling, shapeliness, high and surprising dramatics. The story was definitely *about* something, and you could follow it easily—it was about what two people did in adversity which changed their lives. But here was no ponderous naturalism. Nothing extra. There were barely the rudiments of realism. This was highly stylized, artistic writing with life, not art, as its subject. And to be exposed to it was to be bowled over.

On the way out of the building into the watery Texas night, I came up beside Ray and patted him on the back. (We *were* always doing that.) "Gee," I said, "that was a terrific story, Ray. And you read it just perfectly [hesitantly, painfully, reluctantly, almost inaccessibly, as if all the horrors and poignance and comedy were straight from true life, which they probably were]."

"Oh God, Richard, really?" Ray said, looking nearly astonished and grinning. "Did you like that? Did you? Oh Christ, I'm glad to hear that. I really am." He stopped and shook his head. "I hadn't read a story sober in longer than I can remember. Maybe never. I was shaking in my boots. I was afraid I couldn't finish it. But that you liked it means the world to me. Thanks a lot, my friend. I'm pleased. I really am. Thanks. Thanks."

I REALIZE as I write this how "soft" it is, how uncritical, how lacking in refining distance, since to write about Ray, even now, when he has been dead ten years, is so fiercely to resist *that* fact—his being gone—so that I come toward our friendship with the very same caution and careful, unsummarizing forbearance I'd have used were he alive and present. Indeed, to write about him, to "see" him in the way a remembrance should, brings him so close—so agreeably close—that details blend, blur, become again just bits of fabric in the deep weave of life lived moment to moment.

In the months following our Dallas meeting, Ray was sporadically in my and my wife, Kristina's, life—through letters and fugitive phone calls. I cannot actually remember where he was then. I was in Princeton trying to write a novel, and he was wherever he'd been before I met him: Noplace. Out West. Where his wife was he didn't tell me. I didn't know her. Where his children were was also an unvisited subject, though he said one night on the phone that he hoped to get some writing done and had instructed his son to stay clear for a while. This was family life I didn't know about.

But again, Ray seemed like a man with too much in his train; much that didn't bear discussing, couldn't be made to come clear, too much that might leave a bad mark on a recently cleaned-up slate. And also there was about him the sense of a man trying to get free yet feeling regret about things and people he saw the absolute need to be free of—even people he loved. As long as I knew Ray—the next ten years—there was this feeling of so much good and bad that had been left behind in a single lot, so that among my few friends, he seemed to be facing life in the most direct and jarring way, the most adult way—a way that made the stories he wrote almost inevitable.

LITERARY friendships are a complex, tricky business—frequently volatile, often impurely understood by their core participants. They typically hinge on the very issues both parties are likely to feel least secure about yet wish to feel most secure about because of their importance: the character and fate of one's writing. They routinely eventuate in absurd miscalculations, unwinnowable confusions, and deep rivalries often so at odds with amity as never to be set right.

Ray and I, however, never had any of that. I rather enjoy confrontation, but Ray hated it. And I would over time see him go to ludicrous ends to sidestep controversy: with Gordon Lish, his editor; with an agent he wanted to fire (I was the go-between there); with the director Michael Cimino when their deal for Ray to write a screenplay based on the life of Dostoyevsky went snafu and somebody owed somebody something. Ray was simply happiest when he was happy and when *you* were—not always true of humans. And, since I liked him, this made it easy to concentrate on agreement. Therefore, by an informal and mutual deference that sometimes seemed courtly, we avoided what I have not always been able to avoid with most of the writer friends I've ever had—bursts of temper, hurt feelings, sullen separations, steel-jawed resolve never again to go the extra mile, hard lessons about trust and rivalrousness (I *am* trustworthy; I am *not* rivalrous) learned the hard way, then learned again down through the list of friends, including the ones who remain my friends to this day.

From the beginning, though, and especially in 1978, when he entered my life and my dwelling at 60 Jefferson Road, Princeton, Ray was good will's very soul, a state he never deviated from to the end. And by being that way he beckoned good will from almost all around him.

There was, naturally enough, a whole job lot of "Bad Raymond" stories (his name for himself, a name he liked), tales from the drinking days in San Francisco, Cupertino, Iowa City again: certain citizens struck with chairs; an inadvertent blow delivered to a certain vulnerable artery occasioning a race down a city street to catch an injured party before he/she bled to death. Bankruptcy. Cars towed away, rows with everyone, unpaid debts, police, stolen checks, stolen kisses, stolen time. The old days. He enjoyed telling them on himself.

But just as I never saw him go close to a drink, I never saw any of that behavior. The Raymond Carver I knew twenty years ago had inched his way out of shadows and into light, and he was as thankful, and as determined to stay in the light—my light, your light, the world's light—as any convert to a feasible religion.

I knew something of what Ray liked about me almost as soon as he walked in the door. He had come down from Goddard College that winter, where he'd landed a must-stay-sober job in the then experimental M.F.A. program run by the poet Ellen Voigt. He was on his way to a farmhouse in Illinois, a place someone had lent him for the winter. He was waiting for Guggenheim news, was making overtures to Yaddo and MacDowell for working space; he had a job possibility at Texas-El Paso for the next fall. And he had backup friends in Iowa if the Illinois house didn't work (which it didn't). What he didn't have was quite simply a place to be *right then*, and Kristina and I could offer that. The day before he arrived he'd been in New York, and upon walking up out of the subway on Eighth Avenue was hailed by a hooker. " 'Hey, Curly,' " Ray said she said. " 'Got time for a date?' And by God, I thought, Yes, I *do* have time for a date. But time is all I do have, unfortunately." He loved that story. He liked stories about being down at his heels, stories he could remember when he was flush.

What he liked when he got to Princeton was our whole setup. I had made some movie money the year before, and we had a good house on a pretty street. We made our mortgage payments. We owned our French car. Kristina was Kristina—she looked like a million bucks, loved to laugh, and had a professor's job at Rutgers. I wrote. There were no dependents. We didn't get drunk and take swings at each other late at night. We didn't frequent lawyers. The credit companies didn't threaten us. We were solid little citizens, and we were not even thirty-five. When I think about that life now, I don't blame him for liking it. For a while I liked it.

"I want to get myself set up. I do," Ray said that first morning. He and I were up at six. Drinking coffee. Ray was smoking cigarettes, and as usual at that hour talking barely above a whisper, as if bad memories and certain fond hopes congregated then and needed to be sorted through carefully. He'd already been out and brought back a sack of jelly doughnuts and eaten three of them. No one I've ever known ate worse than Raymond Carver, and no one took greater satisfaction in eating the crap he ate. "I really want to get a good car, too," he went on, "and get a decent house. In El Paso, if I can get there. I want to start living like a human being. I do. It's nice here, Richard. I like it here." He lowered his head and peeked out the kitchen

"First, they do an on-line search."

window at the huge bare copper beech that grew in our side yard. An antique Sears, Roebuck gazebo stood there, surrounded by pachysandra I had planted myself. Rhododendrons separated us from our neighbors. Snow masked the ground prettily. It was a likable little tableau. "Princeton, yep," Ray said approvingly. "You're in business here, old man. All you need to do is walk upstairs and write."

"I have to write something good, of course," I said.

"That's all right. Write something shitty." He hooded his eyes and suppressed a mumbling laugh. He was happy, I think. Possibly he felt safe where he was. "You can write something good later. There's plenty of time for that. I'll write the good stories for a while, then I'll sit back in a big house with servants and let you do it. Fair's fair is what I think. Don't you agree?"

"I couldn't agree more," I said. "Or less."

There was nothing I now think of as mercenary or envious or selfish in Ray's admiration for the particulars of Kristina's and my tidy suburban life. He was on the hunt for something good in the world, and we just happened to be in possession of a sampling of it. He knew he was a wonderful writer and that that could bring good your way. And if we had what he wanted, or some version of it, then he could hope for that. I'm sure he was glad we had it. It may be slightly mercenary on *my* part, but it doesn't seem alien to friendship to see good in the other and want it for yourself. That isn't envy. Envy's something else.

But in thinking about that morning in January, I have always thought that Ray and I became friends just as his tide was changing from not so good to very, very good. What, indeed, would you ask as a more hopeful beginning to a friendship?

I had read his stories by then. He had read "A Piece of My Heart," the novel I'd published, and said it was "first rate, top drawer." And I could tolerate hearing that from him without worrying about whether he had reservations about my writing, or about who was a better writer (I supposed he was). Ray was six or seven years older than I, yet that distance in time mostly vanished when we were together. It was as if he so wanted time given back to him, or at least to seize it furiously, that he willingly *became* my age and at least, when it suited him, assumed my state of being an entreater to the literary world. Indeed, around Ray there was always the sense of time's extreme preciousness and the duty—the fortunate duty—we have to make the most of it.

His stories seemed enormously impressive to me in 1977. Twenty-two stories in that first book, so *many*, all of them finished on their surfaces, so polished, as if he knew exactly what he was doing and couldn't set a word wrong. A heavy feeling of the dire floated through so much of what Ray wrote. People had had it rough, or, worse, *were* having it rough: drinking too much, fighting with loved ones, leaving loved ones and being dispirited over it. There was death, breakage, abandonment, unwelcome people showing up at the front door with all manner of unwelcome news. "A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house." So begins "Viewfinder." "That morning she pours Teachers over my belly and licks it off. That afternoon she tries to jump out the window." So begins "Gazebo." Direness of this sort often became so unrelieved as to be absurd and then funny yet never lost its grip on seriousness. *Life* was serious in those stories. And life, especially life with others, was all there was. So, if your life was in a pickle, *everything* was in a pickle. And anything you could find to help you get relief—locking yourself in the bathroom and asking your loving if once faithless wife to be quiet please, just for a moment be quiet; or climbing up onto your roof to have your picture taken; or asking the two kids who visit your distress sale to take a moment to dance together there in your driveway—any of that might console you.

At heart, of course, a story itself is consolation's instrument. And to me the most arresting quality of Ray's stories was not how much they drew on life, or how dire or spare they were (they often weren't spare), but, rather, how confirmed *he* was, how unswerving was his election of art—stories—to be life's consoling, beautifying agent. In the very imagining of fictive events, in their committal to shapely, objectifying language, in their formal depiction of emotions we readers will perhaps never have to face in life, *there* is pleasure and relief and also beauty. And if in the coming years Ray became everybody's favorite writer it was because his stories—with Ray as their living exponent—shared with the reader an understanding that life can sometimes make you want to bite the rim of your glass of Scotch, but shared it in a form whose first principle is to reconcile the very news it carries. This is one of art's oldest ideals and seems so simple when performed flawlessly.

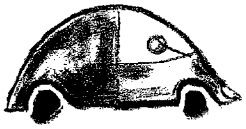
Ray and I liked the same literature, of course. It seems rather Aquarian now, but often after a big

"I'm afraid it's very close to something we've already turned down."

meal, when the poet Michael Ryan was around, or after Tess Gallagher came into Ray's life, we used to read poems aloud. More than a story writer, Ray featured himself a poet, and assumed a certain laid-on reverence when he talked about verse and versifying. (I always told him he wrote poems only when he lacked the wherewithal to write a proper story, and made them out of odd bits and pieces that didn't fit elsewhere. I still think that.)

But we liked Galway Kinnell and James Wright and Richard Hugo and Elizabeth Bishop and William Carlos Williams—that strain of American poetry coming from Whitman toward Philip Levine and C. K. Williams—the poems novelists and story writers usually like if they like poems at all, the easy ones to like. I distinctly remember Tess reading Hugo's great poem "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," and as the last phrase sounded—"and her red hair lights the wall"—feeling a moody silence come over us all, a slightly embarrassed wordlessness about the fact that we were so frankly letting this poem *in*, with all its blunt intimations of death and lust and boomtowns gone bust and beautiful girls you'd never get to visit again. It's a sentimental poem and a wonderful one from a wonderful and rather sentimental poet who never got his due. And it carries strong feeling the way a hod carrier totes bricks. But we all subscribed to it. In 1998, it seems innocent and quaint that we did that when we were in our thirties. I really don't know anybody to do it with again. But I wouldn't want *not* to have done it, not to have let writing that aspired to being literature enter life and become a fixture as that poem has, or to have missed doing it in the presence of my friends when we were all young at heart.

And there was more that joined us. Ray's and my parents were rural Arkies of the same pre-1910 generation, who'd all grown up within a hundred miles of each other and had somehow stayed solvent in the Depression while running a little wild—Ray's parents running all the way to Oregon, mine staying put with solid jobs in Little Rock. Too young for one war, too old for the next. That experience of common pasts once removed meant something to Ray and me, confirmed things we knew, and knew we shared: that having a job or not having a job was a big deal; that bad luck lurked and took hold of you when you were least prepared for it; that who you loved mattered, and marriage was a fundamental human engagement given to shocking frailties; that kids were a mixed blessing because they had to be housed and fed, and outlived you as their gesture of gratitude; and that getting up and moving someplace else only changes the scenery, not who you are. As a world view it seems to comprise a sort of Prairie Existentialism, but it is not without its dramatic uses.



When I was born, in 1944, rather late in my parents' youth, they both essentially took the pledge and set aside craziness forever for my sake. Ray's father, on the other hand, was a millwright and a boozer to boot, and one evening in the sixties he came in the house, had dinner at the table, opted for a bottle of whiskey, then went to sleep and never woke up. And in plain enough ways, when we told those stories to each other, in 1979, they meant something, albeit something simple: that life goes this way or life goes that way; that chance is always involved, and that living is usually just dealing with consequences. In one way or other, of course, fiction is often about just that: sorting through consequences—the past impending on the present and setting into sometimes astonishing motion the future.

EVERYONE knows the story of the good man who works like a demon, never stints, stays true to a calling, suffers setbacks, endures wounds that would demoralize others, eventually hits bottom. And yet he pulls his socks up, turns the page, recovers himself, finds new resolve, after which his luck changes, *all* his schemes work out, strangers love and praise him, everything he touches goes platinum, whereupon he turns into a fearsome asshole, ignores his old friends, begins hanging out with movie stars, and everybody who ever knew him feels sorry they did.

This did not happen to Raymond Carver. There are rare souls who wear good fortune handsomely, who grow and become better with each sunnier day. And Ray was one of these.

From the beginning, Ray spoke ill of practically no one—only, in my memory, of two friends of *mine* who at crucial moments had refused to lend him small amounts of money. (This should be a lesson to us, when others are in need.) His general attitude, even in those shaky times, was to find something to praise, someone else's story or poem, someone's mettle as a friend, someone's wit or intelligence, someone's ferocity—this he especially admired. It was commonplace to all of us who were his familiars then—Tobias Wolff, Geoffrey Wolff, Chuck Kinder, Bill Kittredge, Amanda Urban—that Ray had had enough of bad, and wanted not even to *speak* of bad, as though it might blow back his way on a returning wind.

There was no phoniness to it. We are all given to stand slightly aslant of someone speaking praise—here writers can be both the worst and the most adept—as if the bad-mouth, especially when the subject is conveniently not present, required a certain rakish courage. With Ray you could believe he might experience diluted enthusiasm for someone or someone's work. But, given what he felt he'd seen, one understood his impulse not to bother with it. We made fun of him sometimes. Good Raymond. Saint Raymond. But it was another lesson, even if I and others did not perfectly learn it. "Well, yes, I read that," he would say, looking grave, sometimes comically grave. "I did. I read it. Hmm. I don't know." Or, "I met her. Right. She was fine. Yep, yep. But I'll tell you what I *did* like, by God. I liked . . ."And then he'd be off to more promising subjects.

And I have sound evidence to prove that for all the ways I knew Ray almost anyone else could have known the same man, could have seen what I saw and liked him as much as I did. It's a useful measure of a person that he be the same whenever and wherever we intersect with him. To know friendship in that way is to realize it is not exclusive but as generous as love. And surely this phenomenon, almost as much as his work (but not quite), made him so curiously adorable to the world. He'd seen some things, as his great story of the early eighties "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" implies. He'd had a lot of strong feelings in his life and he could credit that you had, too, whoever you were. And matters hadn't turned out so bad for him—in fact, they'd turned out so great he was damned near humbled with gratitude. So, maybe that could happen to you, and he wanted you to know he thought that. You two had good luck in common. That was him. Good Raymond.

Specifically with me he was a generous friend. He spoke well of me behind my back—to editors in England and France, to his friend and editor Gary Fisketjon, who became my friend. To journalists who had never heard of me or what I might've written. He refrained from giving me advice I did not request, and (at least to me in person) seemed to want me not to be just like him but to be myself and make whatever mistakes of judgment, temper, excess I seemed determined to make, but then was the same toward me when the dust had settled. It was agreed from the beginning of our acquaintance that Ray would do anything in the world for me that he *could* do consonant with his own certain interest, inasmuch as his interest—to be a great writer that everybody in the world had admiringly read—had been forged over a very hot flame and could not be rebent. It makes such sense, this theory of friendship. How could anyone ask more of a friend and still hang on to the fundamental of progress?

I KNOW that Ray harbored several incomplete and misunderstood conceptions about me, most of which I was happy to let ride. Particularly he liked to think I was a fierce man—which is not true, though it pleased the spooky side of him to have me that way. Once we were visiting Provincetown, and took a walk on the chilly beach late in the afternoon. It was in November. Along the way Ray began to tell me about a predicament his daughter—whom he dearly loved—had got herself into out in Washington State. A biker, it seemed, was involved; some diverse bad behavior, reportedly some illegal activity. It worried him sick since he was out of touch with that part of his life, and going back just wasn't in the cards.

"I wish I could do something," he said, smoking a cigarette in the cold breeze, the collar of his not quite adequate brown car coat bunched up around his chin. "I swear to God, Richard, I could put a contract out on this biker. I'd do it. I would. You know?" He looked at me, looked devilled by events. "I'd kill him myself if I didn't know I'd get caught. I'd be the first one they'd come looking for, of course."

"Look," I said, thinking about it for a moment, thinking what a friend could do for a friend in unwieldy circumstances. "If you just buy me a ticket, I'll fly out there and *I'll* kill him. I'll wait by his trailer, hide in the bushes, and when he rides up on his Harley I'll shoot him from ambush. Nobody'd ever expect it was me. You just have to buy me a ticket. I don't have the money, of course."

"Oh Jesus, Richard," Ray said. "I don't know." His eyes flickered at me, trying to estimate if I was serious about this, and in a way wanting me to be.

"Well, shit, Ray," I said. "Is this guy causing you grief or not? Do you want to go out there in your father-in-law role and have a heart-to-heart with him? I'm sure that'd do the trick."

"No," Ray said softly but certainly. "I can't do that. I'd rather he just went away on his own. You know?"

"Well, we can make him go away," I said. "I'll just shoot him."

"Shoot him," Ray said, as if the words were suddenly written in front of him in the foggy beach air and he needed to read them closely. *Shoot him.* "Well, O.K.," he said suddenly in terror. "But maybe we should wait on that right now."

"Oh, sure, O.K. We'll wait. But just so you know you have some options here," I said, relieved not to have to go further with my offer. "There's always a solution to every problem," I said, just to finish it off in the right spirit of sangfroid.

"Yep, yep, there is. I know that," Ray said darkly, tossing his cigarette in the sand. "I know about those solutions, too. You bet. I sure do."

"I didn't want you to feel trapped here thousands of miles away," I said.

"O.K., O.K.," Ray said quickly. "I appreciate that. I really do. I'll let you know about it. Just hold off till you hear from me. I'll give the word." He looked at me out the tops of his eyes and grinned.

"Right. I'll hold off," I said, and laughed. "You just give the word."

Later that year we tried writing a treatment for the director Richard Pearce, a friend of Ray's. In our co-authored story, a man travels cross-country to commit a murder for the good of another man, his friend. We worked on that treatment for months and months, letters and drafts back and forth from Princeton to Port Angeles where he and Tess lived. Though the basic premise always seemed far-fetched to the important people we hoped would pay big bucks for it. "Why would a man ever do that?" they said, and said it often.

"For friendship," we answered back.

"Oh, no," they said. "Friendship's about something else. Friendship isn't about murder."

"In our story it is," we said, and knew we were right.

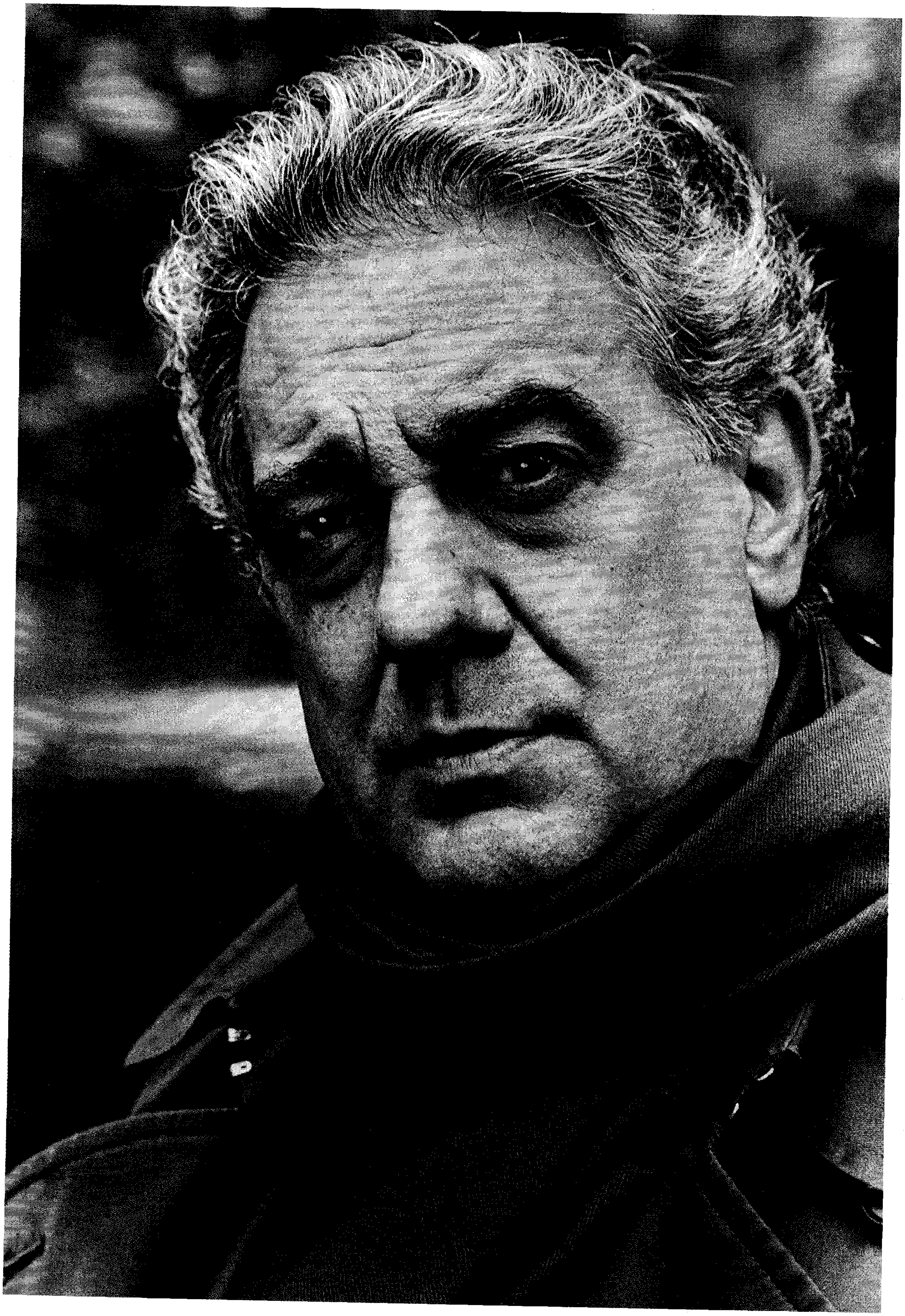
They never got back to us.

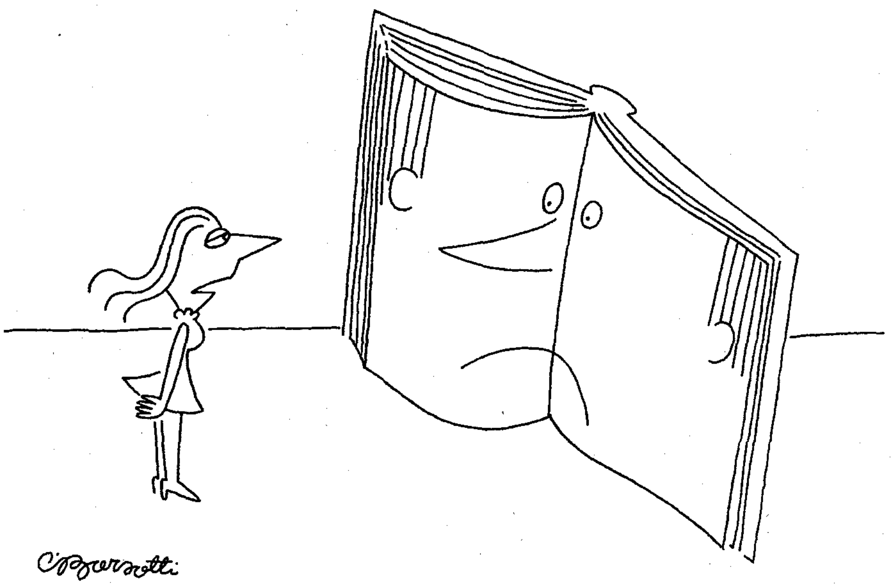
Much is vivid and revealing of Ray in this episode: His fundamental spookiness, born of bad times but worn on into good. (You could tell Ray a scary story and actually frighten him; he could tell you one and frighten himself. He liked that.) There is also his complexly grieving relationship with his past, the life he'd have liked to see work out better for everyone but couldn't return to. There's the aforementioned readiness to amplify life by seeing me as a desperado (though I was far from that, and was all talk). And underneath there's the willingness to take absolutely to heart whatever I or any of his trusted friends said—indeed, right out to the point of the ridiculous. "Oh my God, don't tell me," he'd say to some preposterous misfortune that was only half true, and then laugh about it. It was always my lot and my pleasure, and again this is true of many of his pals, to make Ray laugh. He didn't fancy jokes and didn't tell them. But he loved to laugh at life, and would go

FORTISSIMO

While Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa have been chasing each other on the home-run front, Plácido Domingo has been chasing Caruso on the high C's: this week, when the Spanish tenor steps onstage at the Metropolitan Opera as Samson, in Saint-Saëns's "Samson et Dalila," it will be the seventeenth time that he has opened a Met season—tying the record set by his Italian predecessor. Between now and May, Domingo's schedule includes "Carmen" in Los Angeles; "Aida," "Simon Boccanegra," and "Samson" again at the Met; Three Tenors bellowthons in Tokyo and South Africa; and his United States recital début, in Chicago—not to mention singing, conducting, and program planning at the Washington Opera, where he is artistic director. At fifty-seven, the Great Domingo is still bringing down the Philistines' walls—single-handedly.

Photograph by Alice Springs





"Sorry, Barrington, but you've failed to live up to the glib promise of your early chapters."

• •

the distance with you if life could be portrayed as being fraught as it was, and yet he could be spared at the end.

OVER the years, we saw each other in Port Angeles, in Seattle, in Princeton, in New York, in various Vermont houses I rented. In Syracuse, in Missoula, in London, in Edinburgh, in Paris, in New Orleans. Our letters are often just cordialities sent to accompany itineraries. I have uninteresting suspicions about my own itinerancy. ("Anywhere but here," Ray and I and Mona Simpson used to say and laugh about that, and also mean it.) But Ray was making up for lost time, seizing chances (a reading, a lecture, a book signing, a foreign promotional tour, a U.S.I.A. "ambassadorship") in the plenteous spirit in which they came to him—as the frank rewards of his good work.

"Richard?" he said to me once on the phone—maybe it was 1984—when some new good luck had landed on his desk. A movie deal. A *New Yorker* acceptance. A foreign best-seller list. Some award from the American Academy—the mixed bounty of literary success. There were a lot of such calls. All his friends got them. You couldn't really hold it against him. He was just overjoyed. "Richard?" he said. "I swear the wheel of fortune has stopped on my number. Can you believe it? It's just astonishing. It's good for all of us, by golly. Luck's turning right around. I can feel it. I can."

"It's turning for you, anyway," I said to taunt him.

"Well, yes." He mumbled the little laugh that always acknowledged the shaded side of good portent, even his own. "It's turning for me. Yes, that's right. You get yours right after I've gotten mine. You don't mind that, do you?" He laughed again. He knew luck was a joke. But a serious joke.

"No, Ray," I said. "I don't mind. Mine'll just be of a higher quality than yours."

"O.K. Good. You take that," he said. He liked the concept of a bird in the hand. *His* hand. "You take the higher-quality goods. I'll just fill up my basket and get out of your way. I'm happy you like it that way."

Ray loved the idea of a full basket. Cornucopia was his concept of a minimal good time. It was just his nature, and probably had a little to do with feeling deprived as a child. "Good. More for me," he'd say when you turned down some offer he'd made you—to split a reading fee, to go fishing in Puget Sound, to divide up a last doughnut. He was always offering you something—a piece of his good fortune. He thought that was what it was for, part of why it was good. But if you didn't want yours, he still did.

He wanted a fishing boat, so he got three fishing boats. He wanted a new house in Port Angeles, so he got two new houses. He wanted a nice new car, so he got a red Jeep Cherokee, then showed up one day in Missoula driving a new silver Mercedes 300D, which I was able to point out had Naugahyde, not leather, seats. "By God, I'll see to that," he fumed. "Next time you see me I'll have leather seats or I'll have a different car. That's for sure. I paid for leather seats. I want them."

He hated all forms of physical labor and would do anything to avoid it, and was possibly the least physically fit man I ever knew to be so otherwise robust. Yet he loved to fish, and he loved to hunt—things he'd done as a kid in Washington and Oregon. So we went to Saskatchewan, to Vermont, to Montana, to the Strait of Juan de Fuca for that. It was pure pleasure, and there was seemingly no end to it. He surely wanted no end to it.

And all along he was writing. New stories. Bushels of poems. Reviews, memoirs, and essays trading on the difficult origins of his desire to be a great writer, and giving evidence that such beginnings can work out rather well for some.

Never once in all that extended rain of good luck—the middle eighties—did I hear him begrudge anyone else's fortune, admit to rivalry, take away anybody's glory, or sell out his or anybody's honest efforts. And he never once in my hearing talked of *talent.* Serious writers almost never do, because they know, if they know anything, that talent is simply a Step 1 requirement, and many possess it who never amount to anything; and because talent is impossible to quantify; and because it only promises but doesn't usually deliver. What delivers—and Ray knew it, I know it, Tess knew it—was "being at your station," as Ray said: being there, present to do the work. And needless to say luck, too. Luck delivered. And for a time he surely had that and loved it like a brother.

For a good long time in these years I was of course in Ray's shadow, on his coattails as a writer (if, indeed, I'm off his coattails yet, or ever will be). And even though I surely wanted good to come to me, I always liked it where I was. To see, at close quarters, Ray get famous was instructive. It was pleasurable to see him hang on to his humility in the face of clamorous acclaim, to see him grow confident about his choices but not quit on his desire to do better with the next batch of stories. He never made me *feel* I was in the shadow, never scolded me when I picked up a sentence beat from him, inadvertently cadged a character's name, adopted as my own the direct, no-vamp-entry style of his short-story openings, which he, of course, had willingly adopted from Chekhov. To do any of that, to hold myself against me, was not his nature. He was too confident. It didn't get in his way, me trying to make my own way. We were friends.

Influence, indeed, was a subject we never talked about but took for granted. Like talent. If you wrote well you had talent. If you wrote at all, somebody's work had influenced you. You just had to hope that the influential work was good work and that you could do something good with it yourself.

And if I was on the receiving end of Ray's literary influence, as I'm sure to some extent I was, it would be nice now to think I wrote something in those days that he could have found a use for: a longer sentence line, maybe; a bit more explanation of somebody's motive, a heavier hand at a story's end to turn it toward the light. (I have absolutely no evidence that such influence ever took place.)

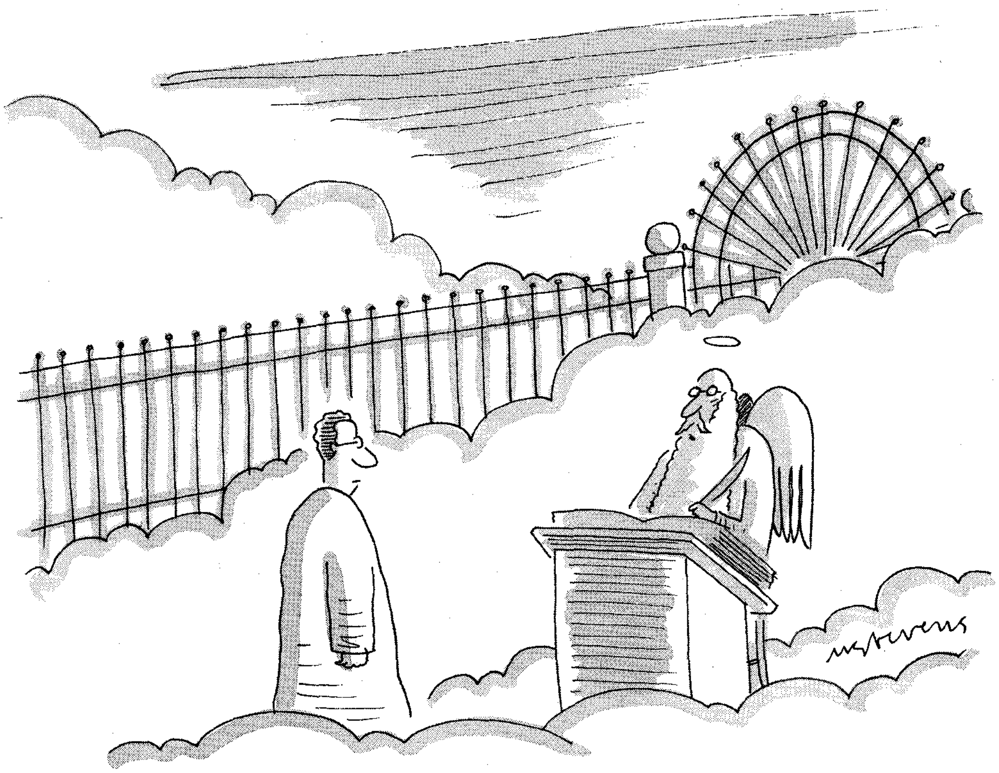
But his sentences were certainly infectious, if only because they *seemed* so easy to write, seemed so natural, provoked such palpable effects in the way they refracted and magnified life. I had stopped trying to write stories years before. I, in fact, began writing a novel *because* stories—the accepted way for a young writer to learn his business—had failed me. I had subjects, but I lacked a concept of stories that was my own. Reading Ray's suddenly made the prospect of stories appealing again. And this is ever the way good writing encourages other work—maybe influences it: you see something you like; you take notice of its strong effects upon yourself; you relish the thought that you might cause strong effects with your own writing. And so you try.

Yet I could never read Ray's stories and write at the same time. I was almost thirty-four when I met Ray Carver, and knew something about the perils of influence from reading Faulkner and Walker Percy, two writers who so influenced me that I can't read them now. I understood that what can never be imparted through one writer's influence on another is the whole, true complex of forces "beneath" any story's stylistic surface. I knew that at best—even in blatant imitation—one achieves only a version of a surface, perhaps taps into one or two of the original's subsurface forces, and that the best "use" of influence is simply to be moved by what you like, to understand you can never replicate it (indeed, wouldn't if you could), to feel encouraged, and then to move on alone.

Influence, Denis Donoghue writes in his biography of Walter Pater, may represent the "presence" of one piece of writing in the life of another, but more accurately influence is a *relation*, "a field of action" in which the influenced reader is "free to consider many lines of force, affiliations, trajectories." And I am happy to say—and Ray certainly knew it—that for a crucial time in my life his stories were an affecting presence in the stories I wrote, just as I'm certain that his work will cast a light of some intensity on anything I'll write in the future. After all, his is such wonderful work. It showed me, as it showed all his readers, what one version of good could be. And then, much as he would've wished, it set us free. Who, for the sake of staying uninfluenced, would've wanted anything different, anything to be less good? Who would've wanted another friend? Not me, I can tell you true. Not me. Not ever.

I HAVE no fancy end for this. I once wrote in a book, "Life will always be without a natural, convincing closure. Except one." And that one, Ray's end, his natural, convincing closure upon the earth, I simply do not have the heart to write about.

Our time went fast when it was happening. And the time between has gone fast, too. Yet I remember it as long. All of it seems to have taken so long, a double-mindedness that makes me think I lived it right. And even though I'll never have a friend like Ray again—I and all of us feel his absence every day, feel exposed to the world in a way we'd rather not be—I think that how that precious time seems to me now bodes well. It was a full, mirthful, involved, charged, dedicated time in which we couldn't feel the walls of life, couldn't go back, could only go forward. And to remember it this way, in the late middle of my life, means I may still know something important when I see it. It means I am not too busy to pause over what's good. And it means I know that now is now and must be treated with respect. I wish Ray were here. I wish I weren't writing this. And so there is this feeling of regret. But except for these two bewilderments—one huge and one infinitesimal—I would not want one small bit of any of it to be different. ♦



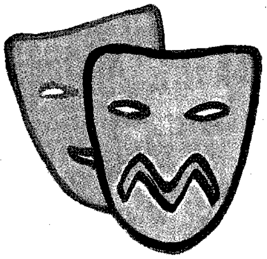
"Any fruits or vegetables?"

FICTION

ACTORS

Who needs understatement when you can have blood, bile, and bombast?

BY CYNTHIA OZICK



MATT SORLEY, born Mose Sadacca, was an actor. He was a character actor and (when they let him) a comedian. He had broad, swarthy, pliant cheeks, a reddish widow's peak that was both curly and balding, and very bright teeth as big and orderly as piano keys. His stage name had a vaguely Irish sound, but his origins were Sephardic. One grandfather was from Constantinople, the other from Alexandria. His parents could still manage a few words of the old Spanish spoken by the Jews who had fled the Inquisition, but Matt himself, brought up in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, was purely a New Yorker. The Brooklyn that swarmed in his speech was useful to him. It got him parts.

Sometimes he was recognized in the street a day or so following his appearance on a television lawyer series he was occasionally on call for. These were serious, mostly one-shot parts requiring mature looks. The pressure was high. Clowning was out, even in rehearsals. Matt usually played the judge (three minutes on camera) or else the father of the murder victim (seven minutes). The good central roles went to much younger men with rich black hair and smooth flat bellies. When they stood up to speak in court, they carefully buttoned up their jackets. Matt could no longer easily button his. He was close to sixty and secretly melancholy. He lived on the Upper West Side in a rent-controlled apartment with a chronic leak under the bathroom sink. He had a reputation for arguing with directors; one director was in the habit of addressing him, rather nastily, as Mr. Surly.

His apartment was littered with dictionaries, phrase books, compendiums of scientific terms, collections of slang, encyclopedias of botany, mythology, history. Frances was the one with the steady income. She worked for a weekly crossword-puzzle magazine, and by every Friday had to have composed three new puzzles in ascending order of complexity. The job kept her confined and furious. She was unfit for deadlines and tension; she was myopic and suffered from eyestrain. Her neck was long, thin, and imperious, with a jumpy pulse at the side. Matt had met her, right out of Tulsa, almost twenty years ago on the tiny stage of one of those downstairs cellar theatres in the Village—the stage was only a clearing in a circle of chairs. It was a cabaret piece, with ballads and comic songs, and neither Matt nor Frances had much of a voice. This common deficiency passed for romance. They analyzed their mutual flaws endlessly over coffee in the grimy little café next door to the theatre. Because of sparse audiences, the run petered out after only two weeks, and the morning after the last show Matt and Frances walked downtown to City Hall and were married.

Frances never sang onstage again. Matt sometimes did, to get laughs. As long as Frances could stick to those Village cellars she was calm enough, but in any theatre north of Astor Place she faltered and felt a needlelike chill in her breasts and forgot her lines. And yet her brain was all storage. She knew words like "fenugreek," "kermis," "sponson," "gibberellin." She was angry at being imprisoned by such words. She lived, she said, behind bars; she was the captive of a grid. All day long she sat fitting letters into squares, scrambling the alphabet, inventing definitions made to resemble conundrums, shading in the unused squares. "Grid and bear it," she said bitterly, while Matt went out to take care of ordinary household things—buying milk, picking up his shirts from the laundry, taking his shoes to be resoled. Frances had given up acting for good. She didn't like being exposed like that, feeling nervous like that, shaking like that, the needles in her nipples, the numbness in her throat, the cramp in her bowel. Besides, she was embarrassed about being nearsighted and hated having to put in contact lenses to get through a performance. In the end she threw them in the trash. Offstage, away from audiences, she could wear her big round glasses in peace.

Frances resented being, most of the time, the only breadwinner. After four miscarriages she said she was glad they had no children, she couldn't imagine Matt as a father—he lacked gumption, he had no get-up-and-go. He thought it was demeaning to scout for work. He thought work ought to come to him because he was an artist. He defined himself as master of a Chaplinesque craft; he had been born into the line of an élite tradition. He scorned props and despised the way some actors relied on cigarettes to move them through a difficult scene, stopping in the middle of a speech to light up. It was false suspense, it was pedestrian. Matt was a purist. He was contemptuous of elaborately literal sets, rooms that looked like real rooms. He believed that a voice, the heel of a hand, a hesitation, the widening of a nostril could furnish a stage. Frances wanted Matt to hustle for jobs, she wanted him to network, bug his agent, follow up on casting calls. Matt could do none of these things. He was an actor, he said, not a goddam peddler.

It wasn't clear whether he was actually acting all the time (Frances liked to accuse him of this), yet, even on those commonplace daytime errands, there was something exaggerated and perversely open about him: an unpredictability leaped out and announced itself. He kidded with all the store help. At the Korean-owned vegetable stand, the young Mexican who was unpacking peppers and grapefruits hollered across to him, "Hey, Mott, you in a movie now?" For all its good will, this question hurt. It was four years since the last film offer, a bit part with Marlon Brando, whom Matt admired madly, though without envy. The part bought Matt and Frances a pair of down coats for winter, and a refrigerator equipped

FILIP PAGOWSKI

with an ice-cube dispenser. But what Matt really hoped for was getting back onstage. He wanted to be in a play.

At the shoe-repair place his new soles were waiting for him. The proprietor, an elderly Neapolitan, had chalked "*Attore*" across the bottom of Matt's well-worn slip-ons. Then he began his usual harangue: Matt should go into opera. "I wouldn't be any good at it," Matt said, as he always did, and flashed his big even teeth. Against the whine of the rotary brush he launched into "La donna è mobile." The shoemaker shut off his machine and bent his knees and clapped his hands and leaked tears down the accordion creases that fanned out from the corners of his eyes. It struck Matt just then that his friend Salvatore had the fairy-tale crouch of Geppetto, the father of Pinocchio; the thought encouraged him to roll up the legs of his pants and jig, still loudly singing. Salvatore hiccupped and roared and sobbed with laughter.

Sometimes Matt came into the shop just for a shine. The shoemaker never let him pay. It was Matt's trick to tell Frances (his awful deception, which made him ashamed) that he was headed downtown for an audition, and wouldn't it be a good idea to stop first to have his shoes buffed? The point was to leave a decent impression for next time, even if they didn't hire you this time. "Oh, for heaven's sake, buy some shoe polish and do it yourself," Frances advised, but not harshly; she was pleased about the audition.

Of course there wasn't any audition—or, if there was, Matt wasn't going to it. After Salvatore gave the last slap of his flannel cloth, Matt hung around, teasing and fooling, for half an hour or so, and then he walked over to the public library to catch up on the current magazines. He wasn't much of a reader, though in principle he revered literature and worshipped Shakespeare and Shaw and Oscar Wilde. He looked through *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*, all of which he liked; *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, magazines like that, were over his head.

Sitting in the library, desultorily turning pages, he felt himself a failure and an idler as well as a deceiver. He stared at his wristwatch. If he left this minute, if he hurried, he might still be on time to read for Lionel: he knew this director, he knew he was old-fashioned and meanly slow—one reading was never enough. Matt guessed that Lionel was probably a bit of a dyslexic. He made you stand there and do your half of the dialogue again and again, sometimes three or four times, while he himself read the other half flatly, stumblingly. He did this whether he was seriously considering you or had already mentally dismissed you: his credo was fairness, a breather, another try. Or else he had a touch of sadism. Directors want to dominate you, shape you, turn you into whatever narrow idea they have in their skulls. To a director an actor is a puppet—Geppetto with Pinocchio. Matt loathed the ritual of the audition; it was humiliating. He was too much of a pro to be put through these things, his track record ought to speak for itself, and why didn't it? Especially with Lionel; they had both been in the business for years. Lionel, like everyone else, called it "the business." Matt never did.

He took off his watch and put it on the table. In another twenty minutes he could go home to Frances and fake it about the audition: it was the lead Lionel was after, the place was full of young guys, the whole thing was a misunderstanding. Lionel, believe it or not, had apologized for wasting Matt's time.

"Lionel apologized?" Frances said. Without her glasses on, she gave him one of her naked looks. It was a way she had of avoiding seeing him while drilling straight through him. It made him feel damaged.

"You never went," she said. "You never went near that audition."

"Yes, I did. I did go. That shit Lionel. Blew my whole day."

"Don't kid me. You didn't go. And Lionel's not a shit, he's been good to you. He gave you the uncle part in 'Navy Blues' only three years ago. I don't know why you insist on forgetting that."

"It was junk. Garbage. I'm sick of being the geezer in the last act."

"Be realistic. You're not twenty-five."

"What's realistic is if they give me access to my range."

And so on. This was how they quarrelled, and Matt was pained by it: it wasn't as if Frances didn't understand how much he hated sucking up to directors, waiting for the verdict on his thickening fleshy arms, his round stomach, his falsely grinning face, his posture, his walk, even his voice. His voice he knew passed muster: it was like a yo-yo, he could command it to tighten or stretch, to torque or lift. And still he had to submit to scrutiny, to judgment, to prejudice, to whim. He hated having to be obsequious, even when it took the form of jolliness, of ersatz collegiality. He hated lying. His nose was growing from all the lies he told Frances.

On the other hand, what was acting if not lying? A good actor is a good impostor. A consummate actor is a consummate deceiver. Or put it otherwise: an actor is someone who falls into the deeps of self-forgetfulness. Or still otherwise: an actor is a puppeteer, with himself as puppet.

Matt frequently held forth in these trite ways—mostly to himself. When it came to philosophy, he didn't fool anybody, he wasn't an original.

"You got a call," Frances said.

"Who?" Matt said.

"You won't like who. You won't want to do it, it doesn't fit your range."

"For crying out loud," Matt said. "Who was it?"

"Somebody from Ted Silkowitz's. It's something Ted Silkowitz is doing. You won't like it," she said again.

"Silkowitz," Matt groaned. "The guy's still in diapers. He's sucking his thumb. What's he want with me?"

"That's it. He wants you and nobody else."

"Cut it out, Frances."

"See what I mean? I know you, I knew you'd react like that. You won't want to do it. You'll find some reason." She pulled a tissue from inside the sleeve of her sweater and began to breathe warm fog on her lenses. Then she rubbed them with the tissue. Matt was interested in bad eyesight—how it made people stand, the pitch of their shoulders and necks. It was the kind of problem he liked to get absorbed in. The stillness and also the movement. If acting was lying, it was at the same time mercilessly and mechanically truth-telling. Watching Frances push the earpieces of her glasses back into the thicket of her hair, Matt thought how pleasing that was, how quickly and artfully she did it. He could copy this motion exactly; he drew it with his tongue on the back of his teeth. If he looked hard enough, he could duplicate anything at all. Even his nostrils, even his genitals, had that power. His mind was mostly a secret from him—he couldn't run it, it ran him, but he was intimate with its nagging pushy heat.

"It's got something to do with Lear. Something about King Lear," Frances said. "But never mind, it's not for you. You wouldn't want to play a geezer."

"Lear? What d'you mean, Lear?"

"Something like that, I don't know. You're supposed to show up tomorrow morning. If you're interested," she added; he understood how sly she could be. "Eleven o'clock."

"Well, well," Matt said, "good thing I got my shoes shined." Not that he believed in miracles, but with Silkowitz anything was possible: the new breed, all sorts of surprises up their baby sleeves.

SILKOWITZ'S building was off Eighth Avenue, up past the theatre district. The neighborhood was all bars, interspersed with dark little slots of Greek luncheonettes; there was a sex shop on the corner. Matt, in suit and tie, waited for the elevator to take him to Silkowitz's office, on the fifth floor. It turned out to be a cramped two-room suite: a front cubicle for the receptionist, a boy who couldn't have been more than nineteen, and a rear cubicle for the director. The door to Silkowitz's office was shut.

"Give him a minute. He's on the phone," the boy said. "We've run into a little problem with the writer."

"The writer?" Matt said stupidly.

"She died last night. After we called you about the Lear thing."

"I thought the writer died a long time ago."

"Well, it's not *that* Lear."

"Matt Sorley," Silkowitz yelled. "Come on in, let's have a look. You're the incarnation of my dream—I'm a big fan, I love your work. Hey, all you need is the Panama hat."

The hat crack was annoying; it meant that Silkowitz was familiar mainly with one of Matt's roles on that television lawyer show—it was his signature idiosyncrasy to wear a hat in court until the judge reprimanded him and made him take it off.

Matt said, "The writer's *dead*?"

"We've got ourselves a tragedy. Heart attack. Passed away in intensive care last night. Not that she's any sort of spring chicken. Marlene Miller-Weinstock, you know her?"

"So there's no play," Matt said: he was out of a job.

"Let me put it this way. There's no playwright, which is an entirely different thing."

"Never heard of her," Matt said.

"Right. Neither did I, until I got hold of this script. As far as I know she's written half a dozen novels. The kind that get published and then disappear. Never wrote a play before. Face it, novelists can't do plays anyhow."

"Oh, I don't know," Matt said. "Gorky, Sartre, Steinbeck. Galsworthy. Wilde." It came to him that Silkowitz had probably never read any of these old fellows from around the world. Not that Matt had, either, but he was married to someone who had read them all.

"Right," Silkowitz conceded. "But you won't find Miller-Weinstock on that list. The point is what I got from this woman is raw. Raw but full of bounce. A big look at things."

Silkowitz was cocky in a style that was new to Matt. Lionel, for all his arrogance, had an exaggerated courtly patience that ended by stretching out your misery; Lionel's shtick was to keep you in suspense. And Lionel had a comfortingly aging face, with a firm deep wadi slashed across his forehead, and a wen hidden in one eyebrow. Matt was used to Lionel—they were two old horses, they knew what to expect from each other. But here was Silkowitz with his baby face—he didn't look a lot older than that boy out there—and his low-hung childishly small teeth under a bumpy tract of exposed fat gums: here was Silkowitz mysteriously dancing around a questionable script by someone freshly deceased. The new breed, they didn't wait out an apprenticeship, it was drama school at Yale and then the abrupt ascent into authority, reputation, buzz. The sureness of this man, sweatshirt and jeans, pendant dangling from the neck, a silver ring on his thumb, hair as sleek and flowing as a girl's—the whole thick torso glowing with power. Still a kid, Silkowitz was already on his way to Lionel's league: he could make things happen. Ten years from now the scruffy office would be just as scruffy, just as out of the way, though presumably more spacious; the boy out front would end up a Hollywood agent, or else head out for the stock exchange in a navy blazer with brass buttons. Lionel left you feeling heavy, superfluous, a bit of an impediment. This Silkowitz, an enthusiast, charged you up: Matt had the sensation of an electric wire going up his spine, probing and poking his vertebrae.

"Look, it's a shock," Silkowitz said. "I don't feel good about it, but fact is I never met the woman. Today was supposed to be the day. Right this instant, actually. I figured first organize the geriatric ward, get the writer and the lead face to face. Well, no sweat, we've still got her draft and we've still got our lead."

"Lead," Matt said; but "geriatric," quip or no, left him sour.

"Right. The minute I set eyes on the script I knew you were the one. As a matter of fact," Silkowitz said, flashing a pair of clean pink palms, "I ran into Lionel the other night and he put me on to you."

These two statements struck Matt as contradictory, but he kept his mouth shut. He had his own scenario, Silkowitz scouting for an old actor and Lionel coming up with Matt: "Call Sorley. Touchy guy, takes offense at the drop of a hat, but one hundred per cent reliable. Learns his lines and shows up." Showing up being nine-tenths of talent.

Matt was businesslike. "So you intend to do the play without the writer."

"We don't need the writer. It's enough we've got the blueprint. As far as I'm concerned, theatre's a director's medium."

Oh, portentous: Silkowitz as infant lecturer. And full of himself. If he could do without the writer, maybe he could do without the actor?

Silkowitz handed Matt an envelope. "Photocopy of the script," he said. "Take it home. Read it. I'll call you, you'll come in again, we'll talk."

Matt hefted the envelope. Thick, not encouraging. In a way Silkowitz was right about novelists doing plays. They overwrite, they put in a character's entire psychology, from birth on: a straitjacket for an actor. The actor's job is to figure out the part, to feel it out. Feather on feather, tentative, gossamer. The first thing Matt did was take a black marking pen and cross out all the stage directions. That left just the dialogue, and the dialogue made him moan: monologues, soliloquies, speeches. Oratory!

"Never mind," Frances said. "Why should *you* care? It's work, you wanted to work."

"It's not that the idea's so bad. A version of a classic."

"So what's the problem?"

"I can't do it, that's the problem."

Naturally he couldn't do it. And he resented Silkowitz's demand that he trek all the way down to that sex-shop corner again—wasn't the telephone good enough? Silkowitz threw out the news that he couldn't proceed, he couldn't think, except in person: he was big on face to face. As if all that counted was his own temperament. With a touch of spite Matt was pleased to be ten minutes late.

A young woman was in the outer cubicle.

"He's waiting for you," she said. "He's finishing up his lunch."

Matt asked where the boy was.

Silkowitz licked a plastic spoon and heaved an empty yogurt cup into a wastebasket across the room. "Quit. Got a job as assistant stage manager in some Off Off. So, what d'you say?"

"The part's not for me. I could've told you this straight off on the phone. The character's ten years older than I am. Maybe fifteen."

"You've got plenty of time to grow a beard. It'll come in white."

"I don't know anything about the background here, it's not my milieu."

"The chance of a lifetime," Silkowitz argued. "Who gets to play Lear, for God's sake?"

Matt said heavily, bitterly, "Yeah. The Lear of Ellis Island. Just off the boat."

"That's the ticket," Silkowitz said. "Think of it as a history play."

Matt sat there while Silkowitz, with lit-up eyes, lectured. A history riff for sure. Fourth, fifth generation, steerage troubles long ago strained out of his blood—it was all a romance to little Teddy Silkowitz. Second Avenue down at Twelfth, the old Yiddish theatre, the old feverish plays. Weeping on the stage, weeping in all the rows. Miller-Weinstock ("May she rest in peace," Silkowitz put in) was the daughter of one of those pioneer performers of greenhorn drama; the old man, believe it or not, was still alive at ninety-six, a living fossil, an actual breathing known-to-be-extinct duck-billed dodo. That's where she got it from—from being his daughter. Those novels she turned out, maybe they were second-rate, who knows? Silkowitz didn't know—he'd scarcely looked at the handful of reviews she'd sent—and it didn't matter. What mattered was the heat that shot straight out of her script, like the heat smell of rusted radiators knocking in worn-out five-story tenements along Southern Boulevard in the thirties Bronx, or the whiff of summer ozone at the trolley-stop snarl at West Farms. It wasn't those Depression times that fired Silkowitz—it wasn't that sort of recapturing he was after. Matt was amazed—Matt who worshipped nuance, tendril, shadow, intimation, instinct, Matt who might jig for a shoemaker but delivered hints and shadings to the proscenium, Matt who despised exaggeration, caricature, going over the top, Matt for whom the stage was holy ground. . . . And what did little Teddy Silkowitz want?

"Reversal," Silkowitz said. "Time to change gears. The changing of the guard. Change, that's what! Where's the overt-

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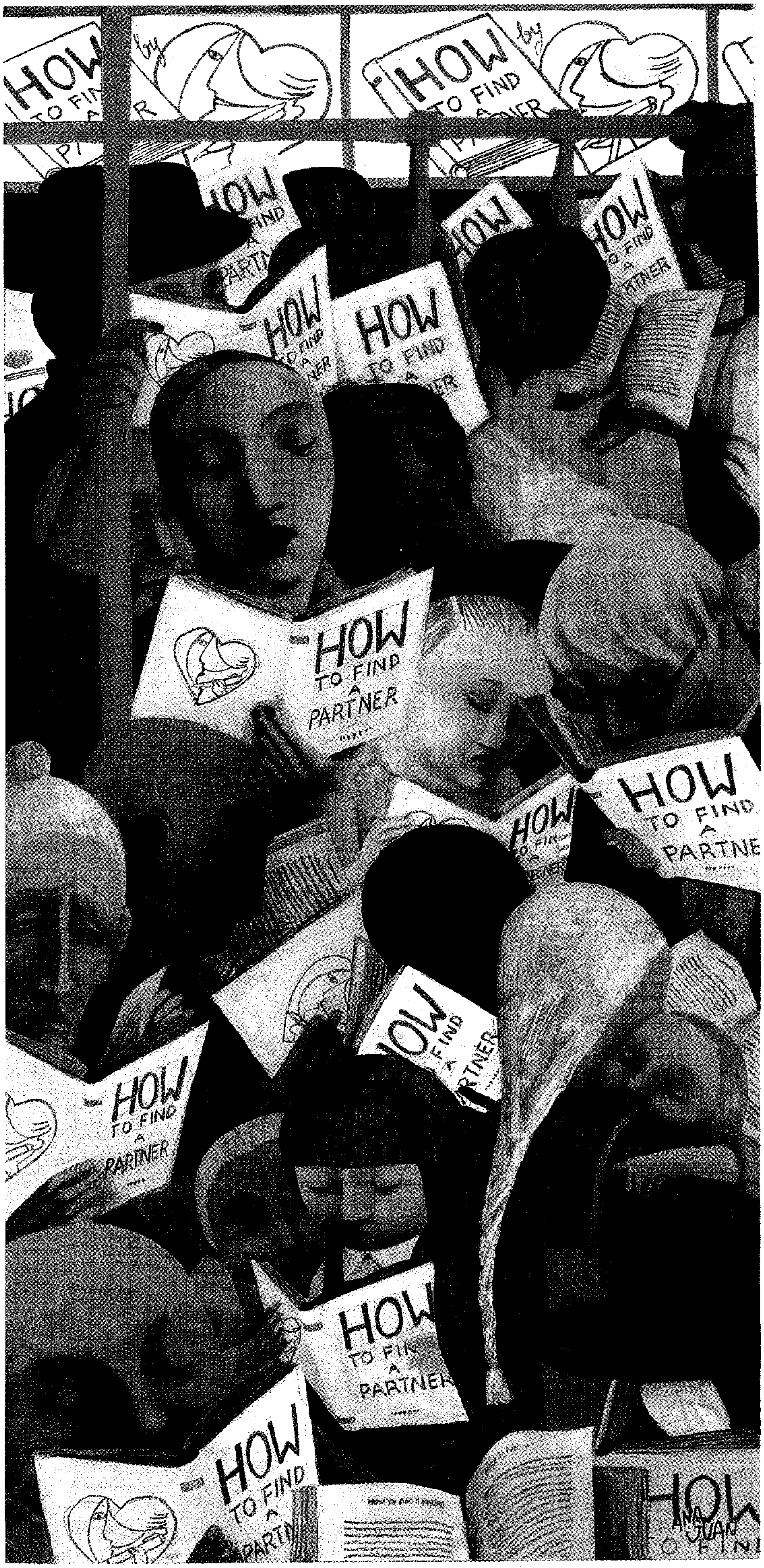
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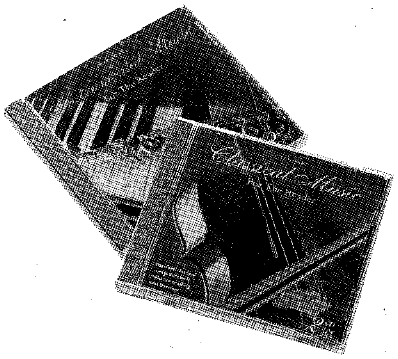

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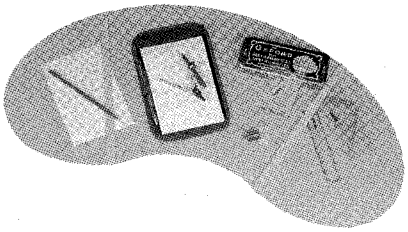

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ness, the overture, the passion, the emotion? For fifty, sixty years all we've had is mutters, muteness, tight lips, and, God damn it, you can't hear their voices, all that Actors Studio blather, the old religion, so-called inwardness, a bunch of Quakers waiting for Inner Light—obsolete! Dying, dead, finished! Listen, Matt, I'm talking heat, muscle, human anguish. Where's the theatrical *noise*? The big speeches and declamations? All these anemic monosyllabic washed-out two-handers with their impotent little climaxes. Matt, let me tell you my idea, and I tell it with respect, because I'm in the presence of an old-timer, and I want you to know I know my place. But we're in a new era now, and someone's got to make that clear—" Silkowitz's lantern eyes moved all around his cubicle; it seemed to Matt they could scald the paint off the walls. "This is what I'm for. Take it seriously. My idea is to restore the old lost art of melodrama. People call it melodrama to put it down, but what it is is open feeling, you see what I mean? And the chance came out of the blue! From the daughter of the genuine article!"

Matt said roughly (his roughness surprised him), "You've got the wrong customer."

"Look before you leap, pal. Don't try to pin that nostalgia stuff on me. The youthful heart throbbing for grandpa's world. That's what you figure, right?"

"Not exactly," Matt fibbed.

"That's not it, honest to God. It's the largeness—big feelings, big cries. Outcries! The old Yiddish theatre kept it up while it was dying out everywhere else. Killed by understatement. Killed by abbreviation, downplaying. Killed by sophistication, modernism, psychologizing, Stanislavsky, all those highbrow murderers of the Greek chorus, you see what I mean? The Yiddish Medea. The Yiddish Macbeth! Matt, it was *big!*"

"As far as I'm concerned," Matt said, "the key word here is old-timer."

"There aren't many of your type around," Silkowitz admitted. "Look, I'm saying I really want to do this thing. The part's yours."

"A replay of the old country, that's my type? I was doing Eugene O'Neill before you were born."

"You've read the script, it's in regular English. American as apple pie. Lear on the Lower East Side! We can make that the Upper West Side. And those daughters—I've got some great women in mind. We can update everything, we can do what we want."

"Yeah, we don't have the writer to kick around." Matt looked down at his trouser cuffs. They were beginning to fray at the crease; he needed a new suit. "I'm not connected to any of that. My mother's father came from Turkey and spoke Ladino."

"A Spanish grandee, no kidding. I didn't realize. You look—"

"I know how I look," Matt broke in. "A retired pants presser." He wanted to play Ibsen, he wanted to play Shaw! Henry Higgins with Eliza. Something grand, aloof, cynical; he could do Brit talk beautifully.

Silkowitz pushed on. "Lionel says he's pretty sure you're free."

Free. The last time Matt was on a stage (television didn't count) was in Lionel's own junk play, a London import, where Matt, as the beloved missing uncle, turned up just before the final curtain. That was more than three years ago; by now four.

"I'll give it some thought," Matt said.

"It's a deal. Start growing the beard. There's only one thing. A bit of homework you need to do."

"Don't worry," Matt said. "I know how the plot goes. Regan and Goneril and Cordelia. I read it in high school."

But it wasn't Shakespeare Silkowitz had in mind: it was Eli Miller the nonagenarian. Silkowitz had the old fellow's address at a "senior residence." Probably the daughter had mentioned its name, and Silkowitz had ordered his underling—the boy, or maybe the girl—to look it up. It was called the Home for the Elderly Children of Israel, and it was up near the Cloisters.

"Those places give me the creeps," Matt complained to Frances. "The smell of pee and the zombie stare."

"It doesn't have to be like that. They have activities and things. They have social directors. At that age maybe they go for blue material, you never know."

"Sure," Matt said. "The borscht belt revived and unbuckled. You better come with me."

"What's the point of that? Silkowitz wants you to get the feel of the old days. In Tulsa we didn't *have* the old days."

"Suppose the guy doesn't speak English? I mean just in case. Then I'm helpless."

So Frances went along; Tulsa notwithstanding, she knew some attenuated strands of household Yiddish. She was a demon at languages anyhow; she liked to speckle her tougher crosswords with "*cri de cœur*," "*Mitleid*," "*situación difícil*." She had once studied ancient Greek and Esperanto.

A MILD January had turned venomous. The air slammed their foreheads like a frozen truncheon. Bundled in their down coats, they waited for a bus. Icicles hung from its undercarriage, dripping black sludge. The long trip through afternoon dusk took them to what seemed like a promontory; standing in the driveway of the Home for the Elderly Children of Israel, they felt like a pair of hawks surveying rivers and roads and inch-tall buildings. " 'The Magic Mountain,' " Frances muttered as they left the reception desk and headed down the corridor to Room 1-A: Eli Miller's digs.

No one was there.

"Let's trespass," Frances said. Matt followed her in. The place was overheated; in two minutes he had gone from chill to sweat. He was glad Frances had come. At times she was capable of an unexpected aggressiveness. He saw it now and then as she worked at her grids, her lists of synonyms, her trickster definitions. Her hidden life inside those little squares gave off an electric ferocity. She was prowling all around 1-A as if it was one of her boxes waiting to be solved. The room was cryptic enough: what was it like to be so circumscribed—a single dresser crowded with tubes and medicines, a sagging armchair upholstered in balding plush, a bed for dry bones—knowing it to be your last stop before the grave? The bed looked more like a banquet table, very high, with fat carved legs; it was covered all over with a sort of wrinkly cloak, heavy maroon velvet tasselled at the corners—a royal drapery that might have been snatched from the boudoir of a noblewoman of the Tsar's court. A child's footstool stood at the bedside.

"He must be a little guy," Frances said. "When you get old you start to shrink."

"Old-timer," Matt spat out. "Can you imagine? That's what he called me actually."

"Who did?"

"That twerp Silkowitz."

Frances ignored this. "Get a look at that bedspread or whatever it is. I'd swear a piece of theatre curtain. And the bed! Stage furniture. Good God, has he read all this stuff?"

Every space not occupied by the dresser, the chair, and the bed was tumbled with books. There were no shelves. The books rose up from the floorboards in wobbly stacks, with narrow aisles between. Some had fallen and lay open like wings, their pages pulled from their spines.

"German, Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish. A complete set of Dickens. Look," Frances said. " 'Moby-Dick'!"

"In the atrium they told me visitors," said a voice in the doorway. It was the brassy monotone of the almost-deaf, a horn bereft of music. Frances hiked up her glasses and wiped her right hand on her coat: "Moby-Dick" was veiled in grime.

"Mr. Miller?" Matt said.

"Bereaved, sir. Eli Miller is bereaved."

"I heard about your daughter. I'm so sorry," Matt said; but if this was going to be a conversation, he hardly knew how to get hold of it.

The old man was short, with thick shoulders and the head of a monk. Or else it was Ben-Gurion's head: a circle of naked scalp, shiny as glass, and all around it a billowing ring of pearl-white hair, charged with static electricity. His cheeks were a waterfall of rubbery creases. One little eye peeped out from the flow, dangerously blue. The other was sealed into its socket. You might call him ancient, but you couldn't call him frail. He looked like a butcher. He looked like a man who even now could take an axe to a bull.

He went straight to the stepstool, picked it up, and tossed it into the corridor; it made a brutal clatter.

"When I go out they put in trash. I tell them, Eli Miller requires no ladders!" With the yell of the deaf he turned to Frances: "She was a woman your age. What, you're fifty? Your father, he's living?"

"He died years ago," Frances said. Her age was private; a sore point.

"Naturally. This is natural, the father should not survive the child. A very unhappy individual, my daughter. Divorced. The husband flies away to Alaska and she's got her rotten heart. A shame, against nature—Eli Miller, the heart and lungs of an elephant! Better a world filled with widows than divorced." He curled his thick butcher's arm around Frances's coat collar. "Madam, my wife if you could see her you would be dumbstruck. She had unusually large eyes and with a little darkening of the eyelids they became larger. Big and black like olives. Thirty-two years she's gone. She had a voice they could hear it from the second balcony, rear row."

Matt caught Frances's look: it was plain

Who proposed his own epitaph: "His sins were scarlet, but his books were read"?

(see page 353)

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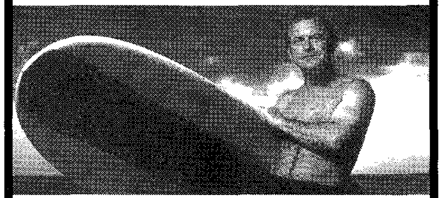

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she was writing the old fellow off. *Not plugged in*, Frances was signalling, *nobody home upstairs, lost his marbles*. Matt decided to trust the better possibility: a bereaved father has a right to some indulgence.

"There's real interest in your daughter's play," he began; he spoke evenly, reasonably.

"An ambitious woman. Talent not so strong. Whoever has Eli Miller for a father will be ambitious. Eli Miller's talent, this is another dimension. What you see here"—he waved all around 1-A—"are remnants. Fragments and vestiges! 'The Bewildered Bridegroom,' 1924!" He pinched a bit of the maroon velvet bedspread and fingered its golden tassel. "From the hem of Esther Borodovsky's dress hung twenty-five like this! And four hundred books on the walls of Dr. Borodovsky! That's how we used to do it, no stinginess! And who do you think played the Bridegroom? Eli Miller! The McKinley Square Theatre, Boston Road and 169th, they don't forget such nights, whoever was there they remember!"

Matt asked, "You know your daughter wrote a play? She told you?"

"And not only the Bridegroom! Othello, Macbeth, Polonius. Polonius the great philosopher, very serious, very wise. Jacob Adler's Shylock, an emperor! Thomashefsky, Schwartz, Carnovsky!"

"Matt," Frances whispered, "I want to leave *now*."

Matt said slowly, "Your daughter's play is getting produced. I'm *in* it. I'm an actor."

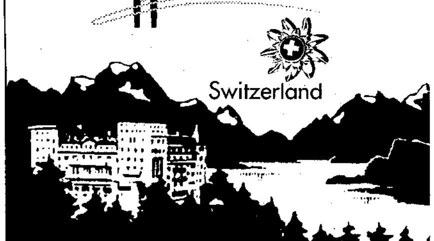
The old man ejected a laugh. His dentures struck like a pair of cymbals; the corona of his magnetic hair danced. "Actor, actor, call yourself what you want, only watch what you say in front of Eli Miller! My daughter, first it's *romanen*, now it's a play! Not only is the daughter taken before the father but also the daughter is mediocre. Always mediocre. She cannot ascend to the father! Eli Miller the pinnacle! The daughter climbs and falls. Mediocre!"

"Matt, let's go," Frances growled.

"And this one?" Again the old man embraced her; Frances recoiled. "This one is also in it?"

"Here," Matt said, and handed Eli Miller one of Teddy Silkowitz's cards. "If you want to know more, here's the director." He stopped; he thought better of what he was about to say. But he said it anyway: "He admires your daughter's work."

"Eli Miller's Polonius, in the highest literary Yiddish, sir! Standing ovations and



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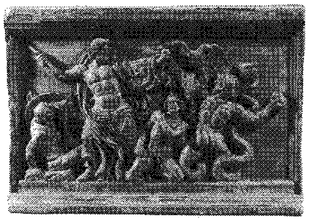

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bravo every night. Every matinée. Three matinées a week, that's how it was. Bravo bravo. By the time she's born, my daughter, it's after the war, 1948, it's finishing up, it's practically gone. Gone—the whole thing! After Hitler, who has a heart for tragedy on a stage? Anyhow no more actors, only movie stars. Please, sir, do me a favor and name me no names, what is it, who is it, who remembers? But Eli Miller and Esther Borodovsky, also Dr. Borodovsky, whoever was there they remember!"

"With or without you," Frances warned, "I'm going."

Matt hung on. "Your daughter's play," he said, "is out of respect for all that. For everything you feel."

"What are you saying? I know what she is! My daughter, all her life she figures one thing, to take away Eli Miller's soul. This is why God makes her mediocre, this is why God gives her a rotten heart, this is why God buries the daughter before the father!"

They left him with tears running out of the one blue eye.

"I think you incited him," Frances said. "You just went ahead and provoked him." They were huddled in the bus shelter, out of the wind. It was five o'clock and already night.

Matt said, "An old actor, maybe he was acting."

"Are you kidding?" Frances said; hunched inside the bulk of her coat, she was shivering.

"You're always telling me *I* do that."

"Do what?"

"Act all the time."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Frances said. "Why did you make me come anyhow? My toes are numb."

LATE in February, on a day of falling snow, rehearsals began. Silkowitz had rented a cellar in a renovated old factory building in the West Forties, in sight of the highway and the river. The space had a stage at one end and at the other a sort of stockade surrounding a toilet that occasionally backed up. The ceiling groaned and shuddered. A far-off piano thumped out distracting rhythms: there was a dance studio directly overhead. The cast was smaller than Matt had expected—the three female roles had been reduced to two. Silkowitz had spent the last month reviewing the script, and was still not satisfied. No sooner did Matt learn the movements of a scene than the director had second thoughts and rearranged the blocking. To Matt's surprise, the boy who had been in Silkowitz's office was there, presiding over a notebook; Silkowitz had brought him back to be stage manager. Matt calculated that the kid had six weeks' experience.

Silkowitz had put himself in charge of secrets. Each rehearsal session felt like a cabal from which the actors were excluded. Strangers came and went, carrying portfolios. Silkowitz never introduced any of them. "This is going to be a tight job, nothing extraneous. I believe in collaboration with all my heart, but just remember that collaboration runs through me," he announced. And another time: "My intention is to clot the curds." It was a tyranny that outstripped even Lionel's. The veneer was on the shabby side, but there was a stubborn complacency beneath. Matt, who had his own ideas and liked to cavil, was disinclined to argue with Silkowitz. The director would stop him midsentence to murmur against a wall with one of those coming and going unknowns: it was a discussion of the set, or some question about the lighting; or there would be a cassette to listen to. The house was already booked, Silkowitz reported—a two-hundred-and-ninety-nine-seater west of Union Square—and he had nailed down a pair of invisible backers, whom he did not name. Silkowitz had a reputation for working fast: what seemed important yesterday no longer mattered today. He scarcely listened when Matt began to tell about the visit to Eli Miller. "Good, good," he replied, "right," and turned away to look over someone's swatch of cloth. It was as if he had never insisted on the journey to the Home for the Elderly Children of Israel.

At the end of each day's rehearsal, the director sat on the edge of the stage and drew the actors around him in a half-circle and gave them his notes. And then came the daily exhortation: what he wanted from them all, he said, was more passion, more susceptibility. He wanted them to be drinking metaphorical poison; he wanted them to pour out blood and bile and bitter gall.

"Especially you, Matt. You're underplaying again. Forget that less-is-more business, it's crap! More energy! We've got to hear the thunderclap."

Matt's throat hurt. He was teaching himself to howl. He had abandoned all his customary techniques: his vocal cords seemed perplexed by these new uses. He

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"Villanelle"
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(See page 182)

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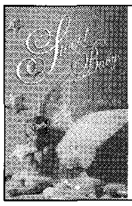

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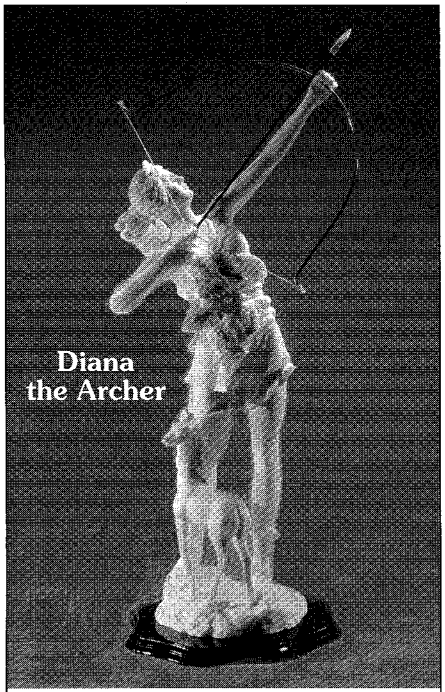

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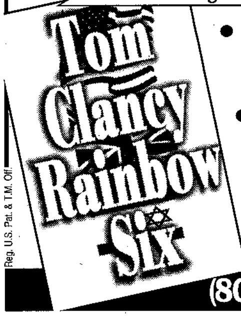

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felt his chest fill with a curious darkness. In the morning, before taking the subway down to rehearsal, he tramped through the blackening snow to the public library and found a warm spot near a radiator and fell into "King Lear," the original. He saw how those selfish women were stripping the old guy to the bone—no wonder he howls!

He was heading back to the subway when it occurred to him that it was weeks since he had stepped into the shoe-repair shop.

Salvatore did not know him.

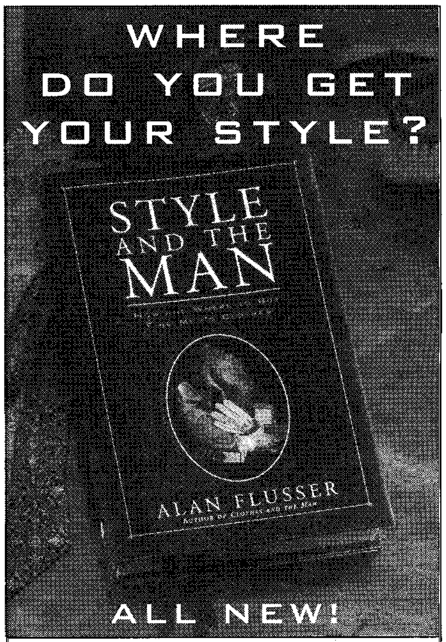
"Hey, Salvatore!" Matt called in that stagy roar Silkowitz liked, and attempted an abbreviated version of his little comic jig. But in his clumsy buckled-up snow boots he could only stamp.

Salvatore said over the noise of his machines, "You got shoes to fix, Mister?"

"What's the matter with *you*?" Matt said. "*Il attore!*"

The trouble was the beard, the shoemaker said. Who could see it was his friend Matteo? What was the beard *for*? Had he gone into opera after all? With the beard he looked one hundred years old. This frightened Matt. Just as Silkowitz had predicted, Matt's whiskers had grown in stark white: he was passing for an old-timer in earnest.

And it was true: in a way he *had* gone into opera. Marlene Miller-Weinstock's primal voices still reverberated, even with Silkowitz's changes. His changes were logistical: he had moved the locale, updated the era, and accommodated the names of the characters to contemporary ears. Marlene Miller-Weinstock's play was a kind of thirties costume drama, and Silkowitz had modernized it. That was all. The speeches were largely unaltered. Grandiloquence! There were no insinuations or intimations, none of those shrewd hesitations that Matt loved to linger over. His gods were ellipsis and inference. Hers were bombast and excitation. Matt's particular skill was in filling in the silent spaces: he did it with his whole elastic face, and in the stance of his legs—a skeptical tilt of knee, an ironical angle of heel. But Marlene Miller-Weinstock's arias left no room for any play of suggestion or uncertainty. Fury ruled; fury and conviction and a relentless and fiery truth. It came to Matt that fury *was* truth; it amazed him that this could be so. His actor's credo had always been the opposite: glimmer and inkling are truth, hint and intuition are truth; nuance is essence. What Marlene Miller-Weinstock was after was malevolence, rage, even madness:



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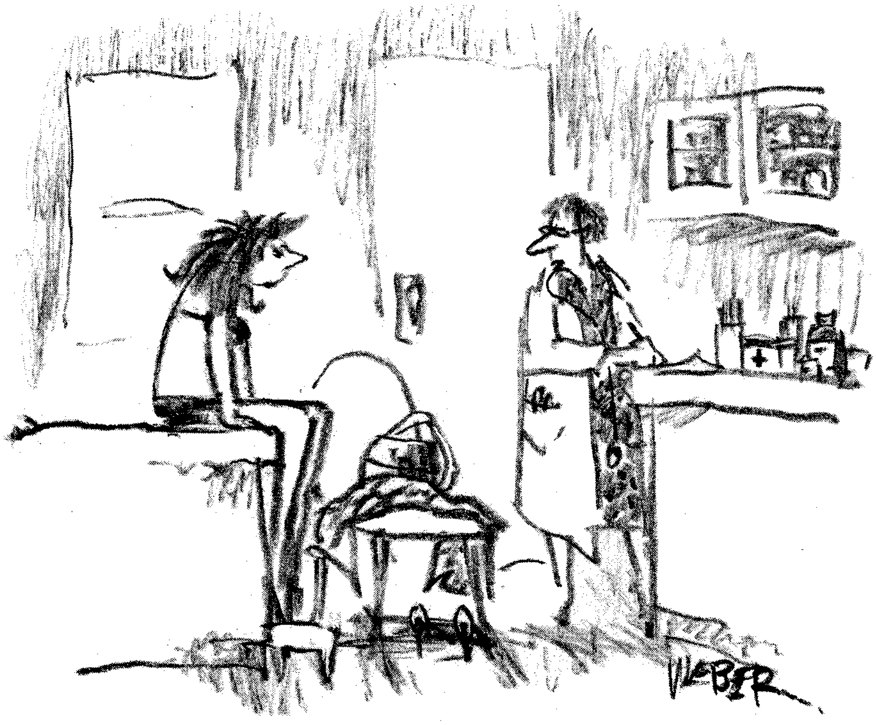
vehemence straight out; shrieks blasted from the whirlwind's bowel. She was all storm. In the gale's wild din—inside all that howling—Matt was learning how to hear the steady blows of some interior cannon. The booms were loud and regular: it was his own heartbeat.

Those two women with him on that dusty little ill-lit stage—he felt apart from them, he saw them as moving shadows of himself. He felt apart from the men, one of whom he had worked with before, under Lionel's direction. And in the darkened margins of the place, on folding chairs along the wall, here was the boy with his notebook, and Silkowitz next to him, faintly panting, kicking his foot up and down as if marching to an unheard band. But Matt had pushed through a vestibule of embarrassment (it was shame over being made to howl) into some solitary chamber, carpeted and tapestried; it was as if he had broken through a membrane, a lung, behind which a sudden altar crouched, covered with Eli Miller's heavy tasselled bedspread. In this chamber Matt listened to his heartbeat. He understood that it wasn't Silkowitz who had led him here. Silkowitz was a literalist, a sentimentalist, a theorist—one of these, or all. Mainly he was flashy. Silkowitz's bets were on the future. He had nothing to do with this voluptuous clamor, Matt inside the gonging of his own rib cage, alone and very large; terrifyingly huge there on that dusty ill-lit stage. Marlene Miller-Weinstock had drawn him in. Or her father had. Inside his howl, Matt was beginning to believe the father's accusation: the daughter had taken hold of the father in order to copy his soul.

Silkowitz was pleased. "You've got it together," he told Matt. "Stick with Matt," he said to the others. He praised Matt for being everywhere at once, like a rushing ghost; for looking into the women's eyes with a powerful intimacy beyond naturalism; for what he called "symbolic stature" and "integration into the scene." All this puzzled Matt. He hated the lingo. It wasn't what he was feeling, it wasn't what he was doing. He had no consciousness of being part of a company. He wasn't serving the company, whatever Silkowitz might think. He was in pursuit of his grand howl. He wanted to go on living inside it. When rehearsals were over he kept to himself and hurried to the subway.

Ten days before the opening, Silkowitz moved the cast to the theatre. It was a converted movie house; the stage was undersized but workable. To get to the men's dressing room you had to go through a narrow airless tunnel with great rusted pipes sweating overhead. The place was active, swarming. The boy with the notebook kept on checking his lists and schedules; he seemed professional enough. Wires crisscrossed the floor. Taped music travelled in phantom waves between scenes. Big wooden shapes materialized, pushed back and forth along the apron. Silkowitz had a hand in everything, run-



"I'm prescribing a divorce, but these days it's practically painless."

Was Captain Ahab really based on Melville's mother-in-law?

(See page 370)

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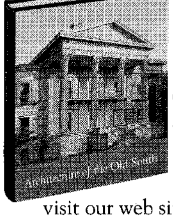

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ning from corner to corner, his long girlish hair rippling, the silver thumb ring reddening in the light of the "Exit" sign whenever he glided past it.

Frances had decided to attend these final days of rehearsal. Silkowitz made no objection. She came hauling a tote bag, and settled into the next-to-last row, laying out her dictionaries and references and pencils on the seats around her. She worked quietly, but Matt knew she was attentive and worried. He was indifferent to her inspections and judgments; he was concentrating on his howl. She mocked it as rant, but it didn't trouble her that Matt had departed from his usual style—he was doing his job, he was giving the director what he wanted. What it meant was a paycheck. And by now Matt couldn't claim, either, that Silkowitz was egging him on. The director was taking in whatever Matt was emitting. He was emitting a sea of lamentation. Frances dumped her papers back into the tote and listened. Matt was standing downstage, alone, in profile, leaning forward like a sail in a wind, or like the last leaf of a wintry tree. He looked wintry himself. It was the day's concluding run-through; the rest of the cast had left. Matt was doing his solo scene near the end of the second act. His big belly had mostly sunk. Lately he had no appetite. He was never hungry. His beard had lengthened raggedly; a brownish-yellowish tinge showed at the tips. He seemed mesmerized, suffering. He was staring ahead, into the dark of the wings.

He turned to Silkowitz. "Someone's out there," he said.

"There shouldn't be," Silkowitz said. "Lily's kid's sick, she went home. And anyhow her cue brings her in the other way. Is that electrician still working back there?" he called to the boy with the notebook.

"Everyone's gone," the boy called back.

Matt said hoarsely, "I thought I saw someone." He had let his hair grow down to meet the beard. His eyes were birdlike, ringed with creases.

"O.K., call it a day. You're not the only one who's dead tired," Silkowitz said. "Go get some sleep."

On the way to the subway, Frances beside him, Matt brooded. "There was a guy out there. He was coming from the men's toilet, I saw him."

"It's the neighborhood. Some creep wandered in."

"He was there yesterday, too. In the middle of that same speech. I think someone's hiding out."

"Where? In the men's toilet?"

"Ever since we got to the theatre. I saw him the first day."

"You never said anything."

"I wasn't sure he was there."

He was sorry he had spoken at all. It was not something he wanted to discuss with Frances. She had ridiculed his howl; she told him it was rant, he was only ranting. The ignorance, the obtuseness! He was seized, dissolved, metamorphosed. His howl had altered him: the throat widens and becomes a highway for spectres, the lungs an echo chamber for apparitions. His howl had floated him far above Frances, far above Silkowitz. Silkowitz and Lionel, what did it matter? They were the same, interchangeable, tummlers and barkers, different styles, what did it matter? Silkowitz was attracted to boldness and color, voices as noisy as an old music hall; he was as helpless as Frances to uncover what lay in the cave of the howl. As for the actors, Matt saw them as automatons; he was alone, alone. Except for the man who was hiding out, lurking, gazing.

"My God, Matt," Frances exploded, "you're hallucinating all over the place. It's enough you've started to *look* the part, you don't have to go crazy on top of it. Don't expect me there again, I'm keeping away, I've got my deadlines anyhow."

That night her grids sprouted "urus," "muleta," "athanor," "stammel," "nystagmic," "mugient." She worked into the dawn and kept her head down. Occasionally she stopped to polish her lenses. Matt knew her to be inexorably logical.

The day before dress rehearsal, Matt brought his shoes in for a shine. Salvatore seemed wary. Matteo, he said, no longer looked one hundred years old; he looked two hundred.

"You know," Matt said carefully—he had to whisper now to preserve his howl—"there's something better than opera."

Salvatore said there was nothing better than opera. What could be better than opera? For the first time he let Matt pay for his shine.

Dress rehearsal went well, though a little too speedily. The man in the wings had not returned. Silkowitz sat with the cast and gave his last notes. He did not address Matt. Odors of coffee and pastries wafted, and with unexpected lust Matt devoured a bagel spread with cream cheese. He understood himself to be in possession of a deep tranquillity. All around him there was nervous buffoonery, witticisms, unaccountable silliness; it was fruition, it was anticipation. The director joined in, told jokes, teased, traded anecdotes and rumors. A journalist, a red-haired woman from the *Times*, arrived to interview Silkowitz. He had hired an industrious publicist; there had been many such journalists. This one had just come from speaking to Lionel, she said, to cover the story from another angle: how, for instance, a more traditional director might view the goings on down near Union Square. Lionel had responded coolly: he was a minimalist; he repudiated what he took to be Teddy Silkowitz's gaudy postmodern experimentalism. Would he show up at the opening? No, he thought not.

"He'll be here," Silkowitz told the interviewer. The little party was breaking up. "And don't I know what's bugging him. He used to do this sort of thing himself. He was a child actor at the old Grand Theatre downtown."

"Oh, come on. Lionel's an Anglophile."

"I read up on it," Silkowitz assured her. "In 1933 he played the boy Shloymele in 'Mirele Efros.' God forbid anybody should find out."

The cast, packing up to go home, laughed; wasn't this one of Silkowitz's show-biz gags? But Matt was still contemplating the man in the wings. He had worked himself up to unhealthy visions. It was likely that Frances was right; at least she was sensible. Someone had sneaked in from the street. A homeless fellow sniffing out a warm corner to spend the night. A drunk in need of a toilet. Or else a stagehand pilfering cigarettes on the sly. A banner, a rope, an anything, swaying in the narrow wind that blew through a crack in the rafters. Backstage—deserted at the end of a day, inhabited by the crawling dark.

On the other hand, he knew who it was; he knew. It was the old guy. It was Eli Miller, come down on the M-4 bus from his velvet-curtained bed in the Home for the Elderly Children of Israel.

Lionel would keep his word. He would stay away. Matt had his own thoughts about this, on a different track from Silkowitz's. Matt as Lear! Or a kind of Lear. Lionel had never given Matt the lead in anything; he was eating crow. Naturally he wouldn't put in an appearance. Thanks to Marlene Miller-Weinstock—swallowing her father's life, vomiting out a semblance of Lear—it was a case of Matt's having the last laugh.

IN the clouded dressing-room mirror, preparing during intermission for the second act, he thickened his eyebrows with paint and white gum and spilled too much powder all over his beard—the excesses and accidents of opening night. He stepped out of his newly polished shoes to stand on bare feet and then pulled on his costume: a tattered monkish robe. Sackcloth. A tremor shook his lip. He examined the figure in the mirror. It was himself, his own horrifying head. He resembled what he remembered of Job—diseased, cut down, humiliated. The shoemaker if he could see him would add another hundred years.

The first act had survived the risks. Silkowitz had all along worried that the audience, rocked by the unfamiliar theatricality—the loudness, the broadness, the brazenness, the bigness—would presume something farcical. He was in fear of the first lone laugh. A shock in the serpent's tail pulses through to its tongue. An audience is a single beast, a great vibrating integer, a shifting amoeba without a nucleus. One snicker anywhere in its body can set off convulsions everywhere, from the orchestra to the balcony. Such were the director's sermons, recounting the perils ahead; Matt habitually shut out these platitudes. And more from that cornucopia—think of yourselves, Silkowitz lectured them all, as ancient Greek players on stilts, heavily, boldly masked; the old plays of Athens and the old plays of Second Avenue are blood cousins, kin to kin. Power and passion! Passion and power!

Were they pulling it off? During the whole first act, a breathing silence.

Sweating, panting his minor pant, Silkowitz came into the dressing room. Matt turned his back. A transgression. An invasion. Where now was that sacred stricture about the inviolability of an actor's concentration in the middle of a performance, didn't that fool Silkowitz know better? A rip in the brain. Matt was getting ready to lock it up—his brain; he was goading it into isolation, into that secret chamber, all tapestried and tasselled. He was getting ready to enter his howl, and

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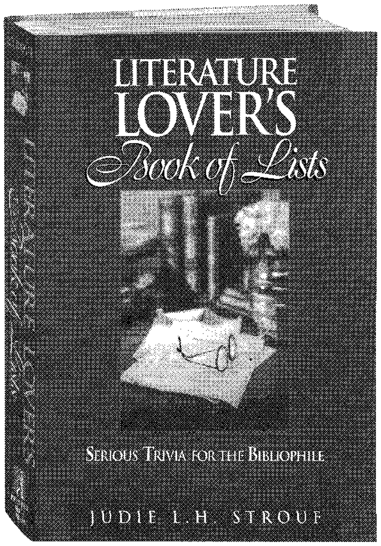

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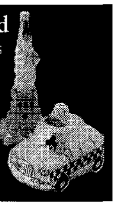

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here was Silkowitz, sweating, panting, superfluous, what was he doing here, the fool?

"Your wife said to give you this." Silkowitz handed Matt a folded paper. He recognized it as a sheet from the little spiral pad Frances always carried in her pocketbook. It was her word-collector.

"Not now. I don't want this now." The fool!

"She insisted," Silkowitz said, and slid away. He looked afraid; for the first time he looked respectful. Matt felt his own force; his howl was already in his throat. What was Frances up to? Transgression, invasion!

He read: "metamerism," "oribi," "glyptic," "enatic"—all in Frances's compact, orderly fountain-pen print. But an inch below, in rapid pencil: "*Be advised. I saw him. He's here.*"

She had chosen her seat herself, in the next-to-last row, an aerie from which to spot the reviewers and eavesdrop on the murmurs, the sighs, the whispers. She meant to spy, to search out who was and wasn't there. Aha: then Lionel was there. He was in the audience. He had turned up after all—out of rivalry. Out of jealousy. Because of the buzz. To get the lay of Silkowitz's land. An old director looking in on a young one: age, fear, displacement. They were saying Lionel was past it; they were saying little Teddy Silkowitz, working on a shoestring out of a dinky cell over a sex shop, was cutting-edge. So Lionel was out there, Lionel who made Matt audition, who humiliated him, who stuck him with the geezer role, a bit part in the last scene of a half-baked London import.

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.

Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art.

Lear on the heath—now let Lionel learn what a geezer role could be, and Matt in it!

Lionel wasn't out there. He would not come for Silkowitz; he would not come for Matt. Matt understood this. It was someone else Frances had seen.

He made his second-act entrance. The set was abstract, filled with those cloth-wrapped wooden free forms that signified the city. Silkowitz had brought the heath to upper Broadway. But no one laughed, no one coughed. It was Lear all the same, daughter-betrayed, in a storm, half mad, sported with by the gods, a poor, bare, forked animal, homeless, shoeless, crying in the gutters of a city street on a snowy night. The fake snow drifted down. Matt's throat let out its unholy howl; it spewed out old forgotten exiles, old lost cities, Constantinople, Alexandria, kingdoms abandoned, refugees ragged and driven, distant ash heaps, daughters unborn, Frances's wasted eggs and empty uterus, the wild, roaring cannon of a human heartbeat.

A noise in the audience. Confusion; another noise. Matt moved downstage, blinded, and tried to peer through the lights. A black silhouette was thudding up the middle aisle, shrieking. Three stairs led upward to the apron; up thudded the silhouette. It was Eli Miller in a threadbare cape, waving a walking stick.

"This is not the way! This is not the way!" Eli Miller yelled, and slammed his stick down again and again on the floor of the stage. "Liars, thieves, corruption! In the mother tongue, with sincerity, not from such a charlatan like this!" He thudded toward Matt; his breath was close. It smelled of farina. Matt saw the one blue eye, the one dead eye.

"Jacob Adler, *he* could show you! Not like this! Take Eli Miller's word for it, this is not the way! You weren't there, you didn't see, you didn't hear!" With his old butcher's arm he raised his stick. "People," he called, "listen to Eli Miller, they're leading you by the nose here, it's charlatanism! Pollution! Nobody remembers! Ladies and gentlemen, my daughter, she wasn't born yet, mediocre! Eli Miller is telling you, this is not the way!"

Back he came to Matt. "You, you call yourself an actor? You with the rotten voice? Jacob Adler, this was a thunder, a rotten voice is not a thunder! Maurice Schwartz, the Yiddish Art Theatre, right around the corner it used to be, there they did everything beautiful, Gordin, even Herzl once, Hirschbein, Leivick, Ibsen, Molière. Lear! And whoever was there, whoever saw Jacob Adler's Lear, what they saw was not of this earth!"

In a tide of laughter the audience stood up and clapped—a volcano of applause. The laughter surged. Silkowitz ran up on the stage and hauled the old man off, his cape dithering behind him, his stick in the air, crying Lear, Lear. Matt was still loitering there in his bare feet, watching the wavering cape and the bobbing stick, when the curtain fell and hid him in the dark. Many in the audience, Frances informed him later, laughed until they wept. ♦

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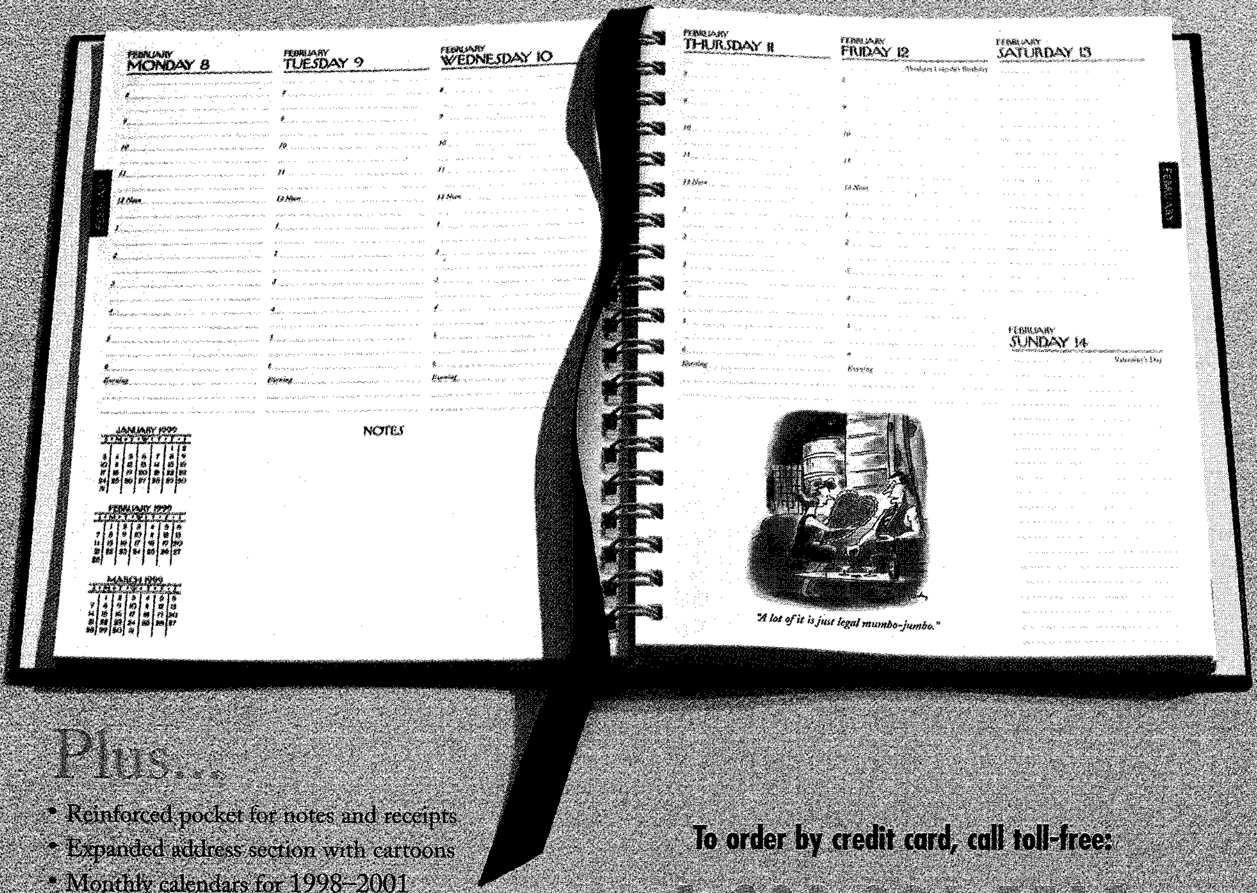
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How a shrewd storyteller became the patron saint of Mississippi.

BY CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT

When Henry Miller set off to discover America, in October, 1940, there were several outstanding natives whom he was hoping to meet: Margaret Mitchell, Zora Neale Hurston, Walt Disney, Ernest Hemingway, and a little-known writer named Eudora Welty. Despite the alarmingly forward letter of introduction that Miller had sent her some time before, Welty—unfailingly courteous—received him as an honored guest. For three days, she drove Miller around the sights and surrounds of her native Jackson, Mississippi, the city where, at thirty-one, she lived with her widowed mother in a large Tudor-style house that her father had built. Welty's greeting was not only gracious but bold, since her mother refused to let Miller into the house—not because of his books but because of the letter, in which he'd offered to put Welty in touch with "an unfailing pornographic market" for her talents. In the extensive touring plans that Welty had devised for her exotic visitor, she arranged for at least two male chaperons to accompany her wherever they went.

The only shocking aspect of Miller's behavior, though, turned out to be his stupendous lack of interest in Southern history: he refused to take off his hat on a picnic at the local ruined plantation, and his apathy reached the point where he wouldn't turn his head to look out the car window. But, if Welty had reason to dismiss this wandering libertine as "the most boring businessman you can imagine," the contrast she offered to her own writing was hardly less extreme. Although she had published only a handful of stories, Welty already flaunted a distinct and not unshocking literary manner: deadly honest, ruthlessly funny, and as subversive of complacent American normalcy as that of any jaundiced expatriate. At roughly the time she was boring Miller stiff-necked, editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* were worriedly censoring Welty's inspired black-jazz improvisation, "Powerhouse," and trying to explain to the genteel Southern-lady author why her story could not conclude with the lyrics to "Hold Tight, I Want Some Seafood, Mama" ("Fooly racky sacky want some seafood, Mama!").

Welty knew that she was writing "something new," and she didn't expect success to come without a struggle. She had an uncannily keen ear, and she tended to write quickly, in bursts of energetic prose that required little or no revision. The uproariously surging "Powerhouse" was completed in a single sitting, after she came home one night from a Fats Waller concert and felt an urge to spin the music's high-flying, improvisatory riffs out into words. Another story, called "Petrified Man"—in which the horror of a carnival freak show is easily outdone by the horror of a small-town beauty parlor ("this den of curling fluid and henna packs")—was rejected so many times that she burned it in disgust, and then rewrote it from memory when Robert Penn Warren, the editor of *The Southern Review*, changed his mind and wanted it back. Its second appearance was in the "O. Henry Prize Stories" of 1939.

Welty had a notably vivid sympathy for the freak and the grotesque, for the pygmy and the pickled and the blinkingly dim, characters who served to set the wider population in her stories at a disadvantage. She knew her outsiders, and she understood what people used them for. ("He's turning to stone," Leota the beautician observes sagely of the Petrified Man. "How'd you like to be married to a guy like that?") It is the uncertainly educated denizens of Welty's ingrown, post-historic, Coca-Cola-sodden South who are more truly akin to monsters—albeit, at Welty's dismaying best, entirely guileless and extremely funny ones. The pitch-perfect talk she puts in their mouths seems to render moral judgment weightless; it is present but invisible, rising up like gas. But then these thankless souls don't do any real harm—there is no Faulknerian blood lust here—except in a way that Welty takes in glancingly, with a sharp little stab at the edge of her vision, as when the dramatically departing narrator of "Why I Live at the P.O." drags all her belongings onto the family porch:

> There was a nigger girl going along on a little wagon right in front.
>
> "Nigger girl," I says, "come help me haul these things down the hill, I'm going to live in the post office."
>
> Took her nine trips in her express wagon. Uncle Rondo came out on the porch and threw her a nickel.

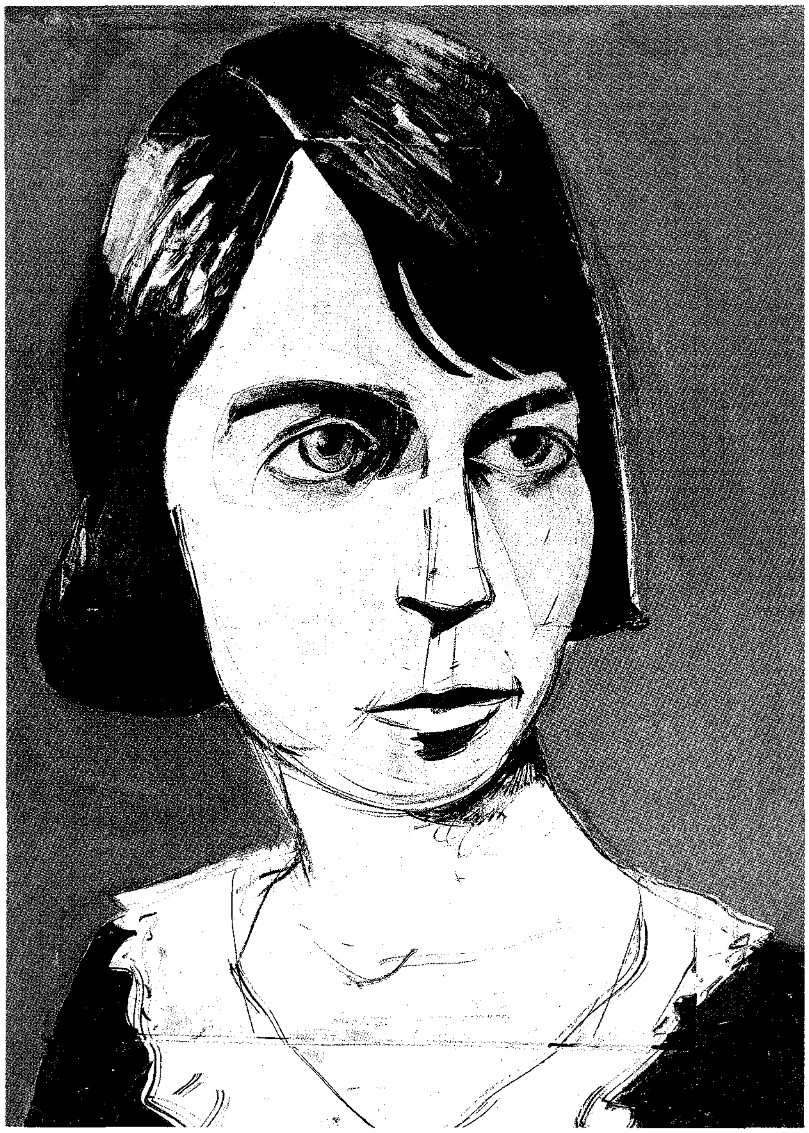
Everyone knows who the real outsiders are in this world.

Welty published her first story in 1936, when she was twenty-six. In the decades since then, the young author of wildly daring fictions has become a monument, the Pallas Athena of Jackson. She has received the Pulitzer Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom; the Municipal Library of Jackson has been renamed the Eudora Welty Library; and the Governor of Mississippi once decided that her birthday merited a statewide holiday. Welty's collected works are now being published in two stout volumes by the Library of America, but she has already entered the national pantheon as a kind of favorite literary aunt—a living exemplar of the best that a quaint and disappearing Southern society still has to offer.

In her best-selling memoir, "One Writer's Beginnings," Welty attributed her gifts and her success largely to having been the child of wonderful parents—an Ohio-born insurance man and a strong-minded West Virginia schoolteacher, who moved to Jackson after their marriage, in 1904. Welty, born in 1909, grew up in a prosperous home near the state capitol; she and her two younger brothers would roller-skate straight through the rotunda, part of a perfect idyll of childhood she portrayed, all kites and ice cream. She attended whites-only schools, of course—Richard

Wright went to school in a very different Jackson during many of the same years—and the rest of her world was equally enclosed: the only black people she appears to have seen were contented servants. According to her own report, quite unremarkably she questioned nothing.

And yet by sixteen she was ready to get out. She convinced her parents that she was old enough to go away to college—first to Columbus, Mississippi, and then to Madison, Wisconsin, which was far enough from home, but in the wrong direction. After graduation, she moved to New York, to attend Columbia Business School; this was 1930, and the theatre and Harlem jazz clubs and Martha Graham occupied her far more than her classes did. She returned to Jackson only when her father was dying, in 1931. Two years later she was back in New York, but financial worries and pressure from her mother brought her home again. It was then that she started to take photographs, principally in Jackson's black neighborhoods, where she went to buy jazz records.



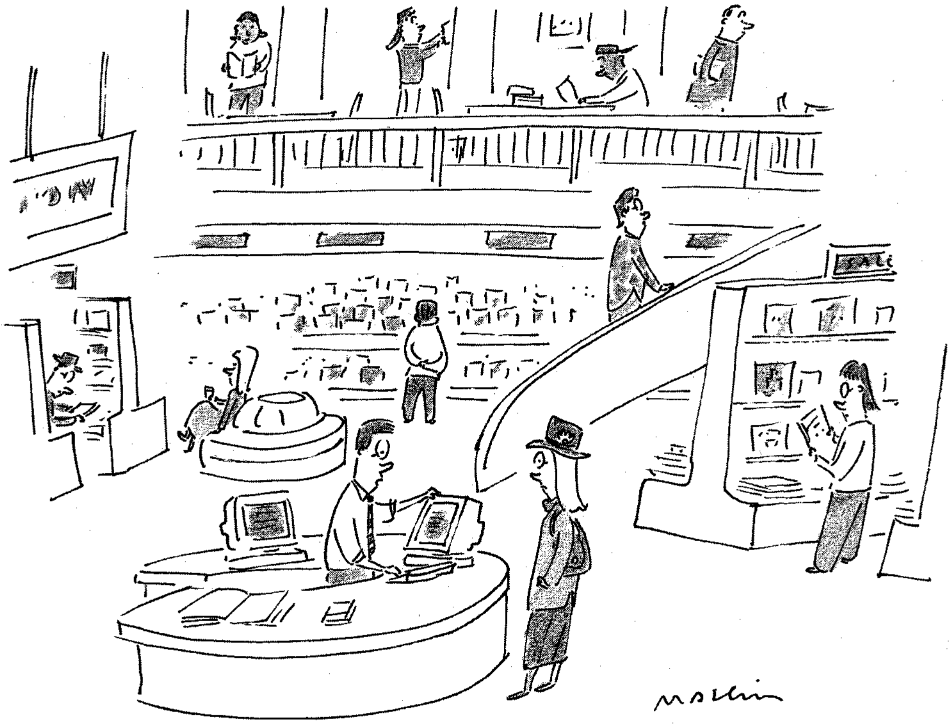
Welty explained her popularity as a lecturer: "I'm so well behaved. I'm always on time, and I don't get drunk or hole up in a motel with my lover."

RICCARDO VECCHIO

Her real awakening, though, came with a job as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration, in 1935, for which she travelled by car or bus through the depths of Mississippi and saw poverty—black and white—that she had never imagined before. Taking pictures now became her passion, and Welty published photographs before she published her first story. When the W.P.A. job was over, in 1936, she returned to New York several times, searching for a job in publishing and pounding the pavement with her photographs. All she ever got was a small exhibition in an optician's store on Madison Avenue. Her subject was black Mississippians, in the fields or on the streets or simply looking outward, meeting impossible odds with a frank and powerful dignity.

It is telling that through the late thirties Welty tried to publish her stories and her photographs in a single volume. The impetus for what she knew to be her first genuine writing had come from the same shock of discovery—from her W.P.A. travels, when, as she put it, "my feelings were engaged by the outside world, I think for the first time." The evidence of this experience is sometimes stark, as in "The Whistle," a story about impoverished tomato farmers who strip off their only warm clothing to cover the delicate crops during a frost, and in "A Worn Path," about an ancient black woman who undertakes a long journey on foot to get medicine for her grandson (and who serenely ignores the petty insults of the white people she meets along the way; she, too, receives a nickel). Despite the subjects, there is nothing didactic in these stories; Welty's tone remains as light and precise here as in her freak-show comedies. And, like the comedies, these stories do not need to name the big subjects they touch on—race, deprivation, ignorance, morality—because the author's quick chiselling of character includes them all.

A brilliant array of these stories appeared in Welty's first collection, "A Curtain of Green," which was published late in 1941, after being held up for months while Welty trembled to ask the magisterial Katherine Anne Porter to complete a promised introduction. The book contained six years of varied, jolting, intense storytelling, by an author who now gave no sign of having ever willingly stepped off her front porch. Welty had long been apologetic about not having "been in jail or trodden grapes like other young people"—as she put it in an autobiographical note to her first published story—but Porter's introduction transformed her into a holy vestal of inexperience, with no personal history to mention and no use for the wider world, a Little Miss Muffett entirely content at home, "where she lives with her mother, among her lifelong friends and acquaintances, quite simply and amiably." In part, this reflects Porter's amused condescension toward the comparatively awkward young woman whose work she admired. (Her famous reply to Welty's confession that she was still a virgin was "Yes, dear, and you always will be.") But if the image



"We have a calendar based on the book, stationery based on the book, an audiotape of the book, and a videotape of the movie based on the book, but we don't have the book."

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was rather unfair—to Welty's past and to her work and desires—it was one that Welty herself now seemed set on making real.

She had recently completed a book that accords all too well with this encroaching sense of her limits. "The Robber Bridegroom" is a novella-length fairy tale, mixing wicked stepmothers and golden heroines from the Brothers Grimm with old Mississippi legends of robbers and heroes along the Natchez Trace. Aiming at "once upon a time," Welty willingly threw off her gifts for character and for the revelations of ordinary talk, and moved into a realm of symbolism, cutout figures, and lockjaw whimsy. ("'Ho! Ho! Ho!' said the second traveler.") The reviews, however, were sometimes better than they had been for Welty's stories, and one critic—presumably noting that the plot revolved around a wandering innocent roughly educated by the world—compared the book to "Candide." As an indication of Welty's theme, the comparison is not far off. But if she had sunk all her virtues into a parable, what was it about?

Concerning this, no one seemed to have a clue. Yet despite the book's tone of "joyous idiocy"—as another reviewer wrote, apparently in praise—it is clear that politics, in the broadest sense, runs like a murky source beneath the overbright tale. For Welty's "innocent" man—she uses the adjective repeatedly—is a Southern planter who accumulates great wealth without any effort or desire. A purely noble gentleman, he is pushed on by the greed of his second wife, a spiritual foreigner from Kentucky who demands that he build her a vast plantation house. The book posits a golden age of the gracious South: a time when there were individual slaves but which was somehow distinct from the later age of institutionalized slavery. No wonder Welty had to write this as a fairy tale.

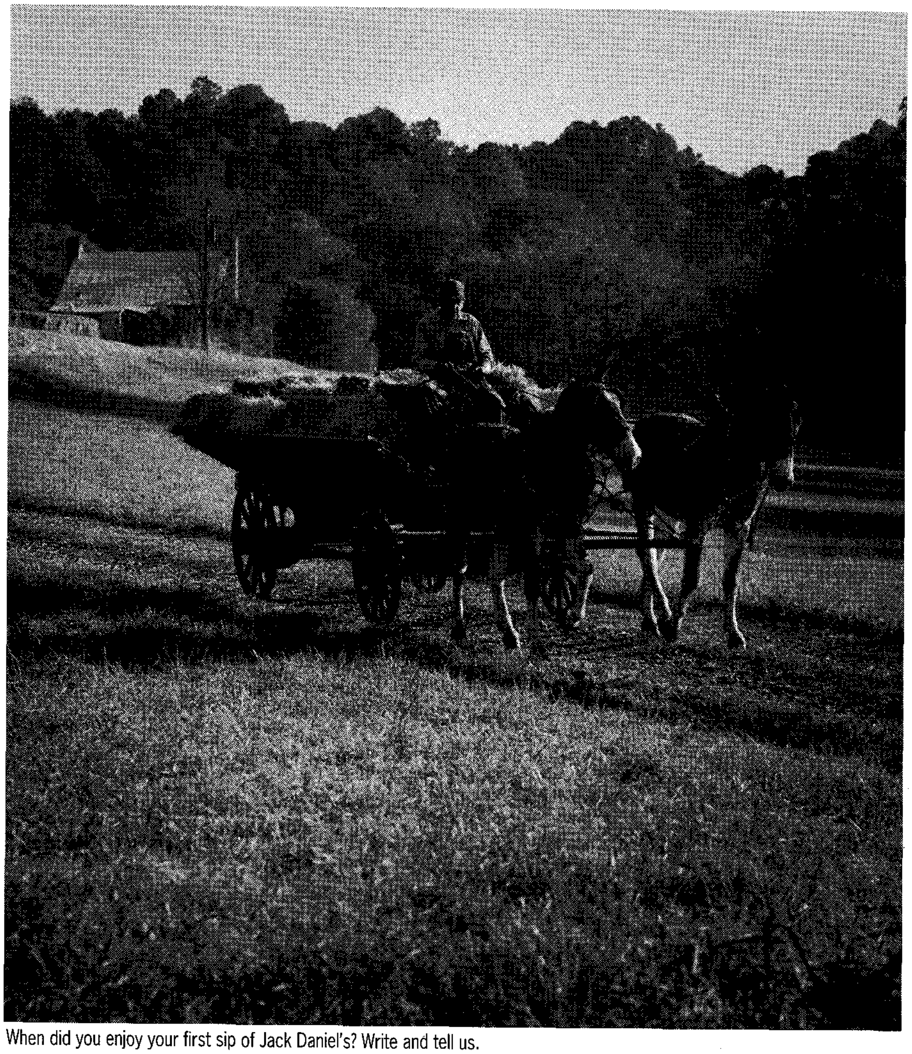
At the story's end, the wearied hero bids farewell, in a confusing speech of Yeatsian prophecy and horror, involving gold and slaves and buzzards and a planter who "makes a gesture of abundance with his riding whip." A gesture of abundance? Welty was clearly struggling with some peculiarly knotted ideas. In 1944, she wrote an extravagantly lyric essay entitled "Some Notes on River Country," in which she discussed the history of a lengthy section of the Mississippi: "Wonderful things have come down the current of this river.... Every kind of treasure, every kind of bearer of treasure has come down, and armadas and flotillas, and the most frivolous of things, too, and the most pleasure-giving of people." In this Watteau-like panorama, there is never any unfrivolous human cargo coming down the river. Possibly these evasions and glamorizations did not seem so far-fetched to the average white resident of Jackson in the nineteen-forties. But nothing about Welty's writing had seemed average before.

LITTLE is known about Welty's life beyond what she has chosen to tell us. She continues to maintain that she has no personal history to speak of, and adds that whatever evidence exists to the contrary she is going to burn. Everything that matters has been in front of us all along, in the stories, the novels, and the literary and autobiographical essays. This fall, however, the Library of America edition of Welty's works may be read alongside the first biography of the eighty-nine-year-old author which has ever been attempted—needless to say, without her coöperation. Ann Waldron, the persistent author of "Eudora: A Writer's Life" (Doubleday; $25.95), details several early trips to Welty's door, and a response as intractable as it was—what else?—gracious: rather like the response to Henry Miller's asking her to write pornography. But it took Waldron a lot longer than it did Miller to realize that Welty was not going to produce the goods.

With Welty's friends instructed not to talk, and with no access to private papers, Waldron depends on a lot of previously published material, frankly throws up her hands at the gaps (her opening chapter is entitled "The Teenager"), and discovers a few simple but resonating facts. It is appalling that just about everyone willing to speak of Welty in her youth volunteers that she was physically unattractive: "She was ugly to the point of being grotesque," an unnamed source reports, in what soon amounts to a chorus. And while one would gladly do violence to a former belle who tells Waldron, "I was pretty, so our paths didn't cross much," her statement does make clear what kind of segregation must have been the ruling evil of Welty's early life.

Equally important is how she overcame it. Almost every statement about Welty's looks comes to a "but" and turns itself around: but she was so nice, she was so helpful, she was so enthusiastic that her looks entirely ceased to matter. She did not have dates, but she never minded helping other girls get dressed for theirs. This was selflessness as survival, graciousness learned by the rack and the screw. Add to it a forcefully dominating mother and a fearful but hungry spirit and what do you get? A woman who felt honor-bound to return home at twenty-two, when her mother was widowed, and then spent the next quarter century stealing as many weeks and months away as possible—she had to go to New York to get some privacy, she frets in a letter, she had to go to get some time to write—while fulfilling the obligations of an almost egregiously dutiful daughter. (In 1952, Katherine Anne Porter visited Jackson and was furious when she learned that Welty—aged forty-two—had to ask her mother if Porter could come for dinner; what's more, her mother said no.) You also get, it seems, a woman who spent seventeen years of her life in love with a homosexual man.

"Everybody is asking about John Robinson these days," Welty complained during an interview, in 1993. The role that Waldron gives him is indeed central—and justifiably so, in the light of his significance not only in Welty's life but for her work. A tall and handsome man and an aspiring writer, Robinson became a friend of Welty's in 1933, when he returned to Jackson from graduate school. Although he moved to New Orleans in 1936, their companionship flourished; after he joined the Army, in 1941, Welty rushed to meet him whenever he was on leave. In these years, Welty's letters to the multiply married Katherine Anne Porter are a bit breathless about the quantities of camellias that he brought her but reveal little of unbotanical inter-



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est. Although Waldron concludes that the available facts do not establish "whether they were friends or lovers," she notes that Welty's fiction is full of signs that, sexually, something was horribly wrong.

The books and stories would be quite sexless, in fact, were it not for the rapes—which, even as rapes, are among the strangest such scenes in modern fiction. They are without violence, without emotion, even without flesh—all abstraction and tortured syntax. He "robbed her of that which he had left her the day before," Welty writes in "The Robber Bridegroom." (What the robber took before were her clothes.) "He violated her and still he was without care," according to a 1942 story entitled "At the Landing," in which the heroine eats an enormous meal immediately afterward, gratefully demonstrating her "now lost starvation." Waldron convincingly suggests a source for this dire but bodiless sex in Welty's deep entanglement with a man who would not touch her. But the biographer ignores the far more meaningful influence that Robinson seems to have had on Welty's writing—an influence that was profoundly political.

THE son of an old and wealthy Delta family, Robinson was part of the historic South in a way that Welty never was. His stepgrandfather was Mississippi's infamous Governor J. K. Vardaman, the racist demagogue responsible for the Jim Crow laws passed after his election, in 1904—the very year when Welty's parents moved to Jackson. Robinson seems to have been an impassioned dilettante of local history: an explorer of the big old houses and the little river towns (Welty's "River Country" essay was sent to him for his approval) and a scholar of family histories. Perhaps his enthusiasm was irresistible; perhaps she wanted more than anything to please him; perhaps—particularly after her first book was done—she simply needed a new subject. But Welty's abrupt about-face from the roads of the W.P.A. to the legendary trails of the Natchez Trace—and then on to the plantations of the Delta—would probably not have happened without him.

In 1941 and 1942, she completed eight stories about the Natchez Trace for a new collection, "The Wide Net"; the title story was dedicated to Robinson. Published in 1943, to disappointed reviews, the stories are often artificial and overliterary, the work of a gifted writer clearly struggling with the burden of being an Author. At Welty's best, however, her artifice takes on an intensely lyric, dancing energy—animating characters as simple in outline and rich in color as commedia-dell'arte figures—that keeps the action hovering just above reality. One story that manages to remain aloft is the iridescent "Asphodel," in which three gossipy old maids confront the buck-naked god Pan while on a picnic at (where else?) the local ruined plantation, and run off, pursued by a pack of goats. The story seems part mock-Faulkner and—in the fleet departure of the suddenly sexually energized ladies—part Martha Graham. It suggests Welty's ability to slip quietly into place among the best (if far more thunderously grand) American mythologists.

The inspiration for her first novel, "Delta Wedding," was owed directly to John Robinson. In 1945, he suggested that Welty read the diaries of his great-great-grandmother, a Delta plantation mistress who recorded the events of her life from 1832 through 1870. The work that grew from this chronicle was a labor of love—in some ways literally, with Robinson reading each chapter as it was completed. Because Welty didn't feel comfortable writing about a period she'd never known, the setting was moved to 1923—a year she chose precisely because it offered "nothing except the family" to concentrate on. Despite the appearance of an occasional automobile, however, or a reference to baying dogs at nearby Parchman prison—the lowest hell of the Jim Crow system, built by Governor Vardaman only in 1905—one could read the entire book without suspecting the transposition in time, or even realizing that the Civil War had occurred. Its characters, the Fairchild family of Shellmound, are benevolent, if temperamental, aristocrats, and their empire is maintained by largely comic and apparently contented Negroes—Bitsy, Roxie, Little Uncle, Vi'let, Man-Son—who give little sign of wanting the world any other way.

When "Delta Wedding" was published, in 1946, critical swoons over Welty's language were mixed with horror

SHOWCASE

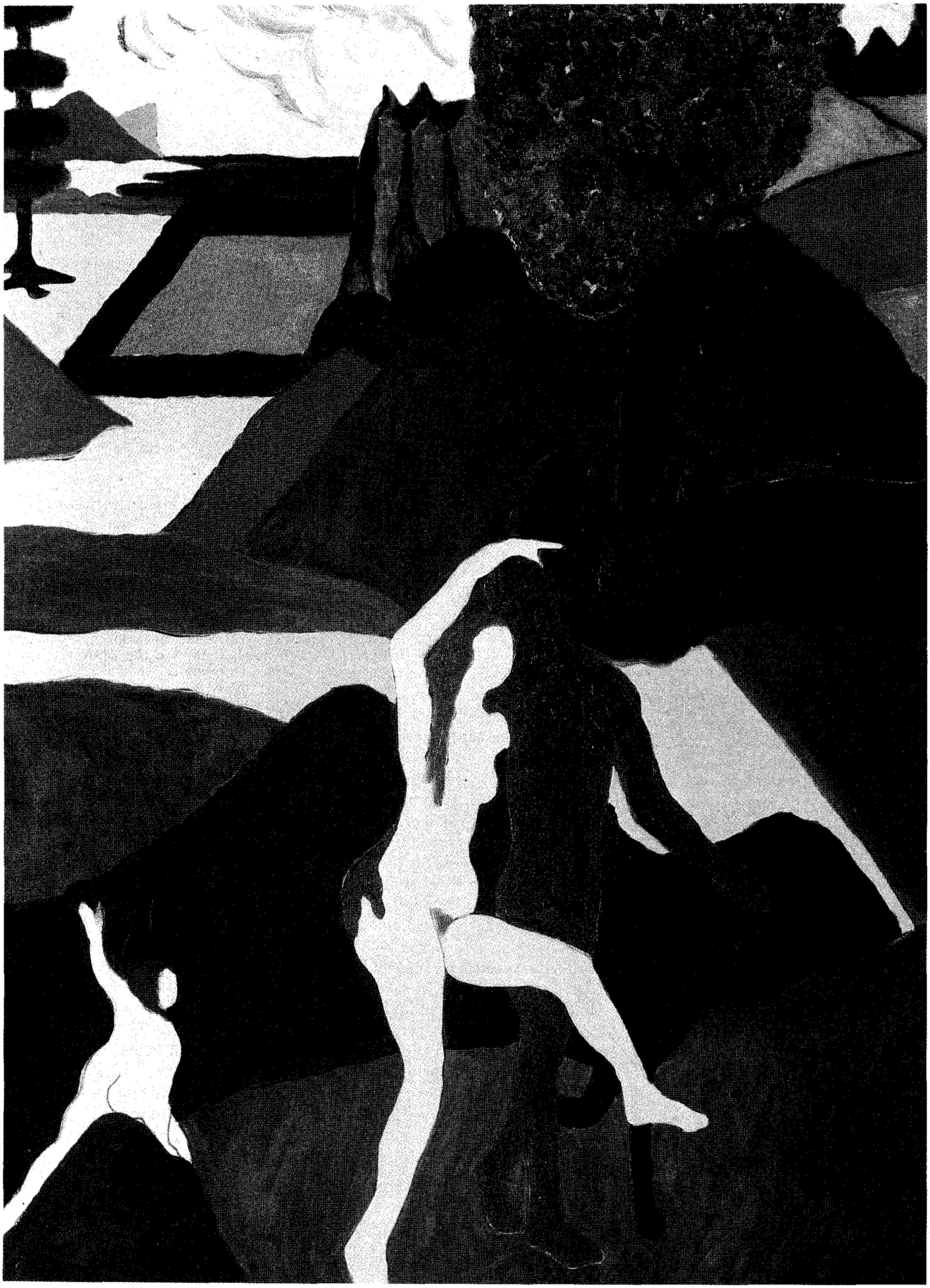
BODY AND SOUL

ON the rare occasions when black American artists are discussed in an art magazine or a textbook, the word "primitive" usually puts in an appearance. The painter Bob Thompson, who was often treated as an aesthetic primitive in the mostly white Abstract Expressionist art world of the early sixties, was no exception to the rule. For his frequent references to Italian Renaissance painters, like Piero della Francesca, he was criticized as a nappy-headed handmaiden to the grand tradition of European art, which then still cast a heavy shadow over the ambitious and rambunctious developing American art scene.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1937, Thompson moved to New York in the late fifties. Here he participated in beat "happenings" and produced a series of utterly original large-scale canvases that depict the latter-day Edens of interracial sex, drugs, whiskey, and smoky jazz clubs. But even in the outlaw society of Lower East Side hip, which included his friends Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Ornette Coleman, and Red Grooms, Thompson was an anomaly: a young black male whom white patrons adored and whose success other blacks resented. He developed a style that was notable not only for its neoclassical and biomorphic shapes but also for its unflinching emotional range. His demons are everywhere in his work—from his anxiety at being an "exceptional" black man in a white world to the drug abuse that helped him escape that anxiety.

Since his death, in 1966, Thompson has been more or less consigned to the role of flipped-out black junkie genius—a role that he shares with the eighties art world's black primitive, Jean-Michel Basquiat. The romance that has developed around the tragedy of his life has often prevented his work from being seen for what it is. The curator Thelma Golden's revisionist retrospective (at the Whitney Museum until January 3rd) should act as a corrective and allow us to assess this artist on the basis of what he achieved, not of what we've imagined for him. —HILTON ALS

"VENUS AND ADONIS" (1964); COLLECTION ELIZABETH AND ELIOT BANK



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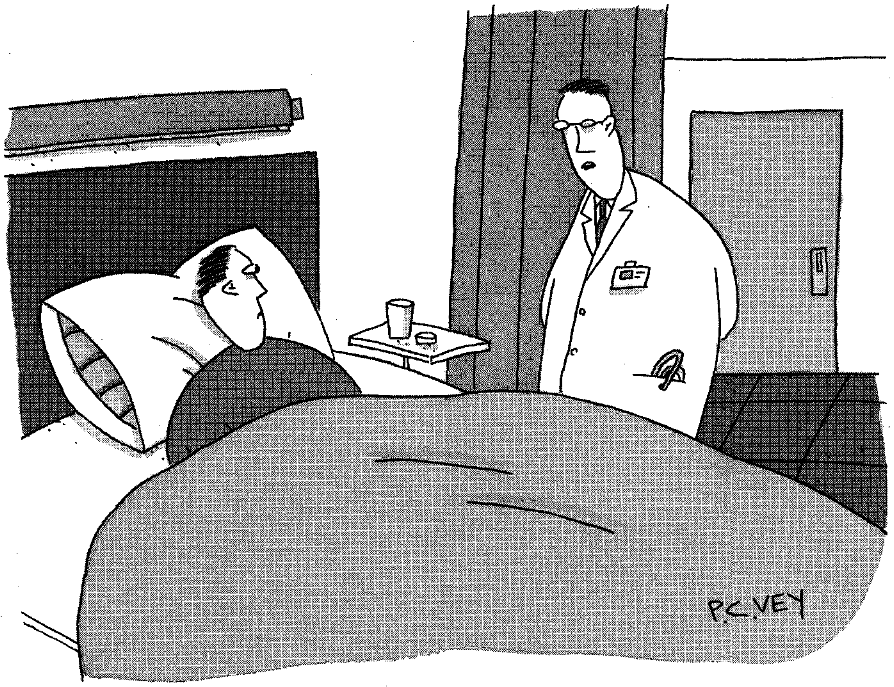

"In the future, everybody will have fifteen minutes of health-care coverage."

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at the book's contents. In *The Nation*, Diana Trilling wrote, quite simply, "This is a value system to which I deeply oppose myself," and *Time* called it all that could be expected from a member of the Junior League. Politically, the timelessness of Welty's book was defensible only in emphasizing a point that this country—in the wake of Wright's "Black Boy"—was just beginning to address; namely, that in the twentieth century parts of the South had effectively recreated conditions little better than those that had prevailed before the firing on Fort Sumter. Certainly this was true of the Delta: studies from the early forties found that it stood alone in its brutal restrictions on Negro life. When, in "Delta Wedding," the field hand Man-Son raises his hat to the Fairchilds' spirited, Scarlett O'Hara-like daughter, Dabny, what seems an act of devotion is also an act of obedience to what passed for law, not only in 1923 but in 1946. Welty claimed that she did not condone or endorse—this was not the job of the novelist—but merely described. What she describes, however, so gorgeously, is a dreamscape, a never-never land:

> Above in an unbroken circle, all around the wheel of the level world, lay silvery-blue clouds whose edges melted and changed into the pink and blue of sky. Girls and horses lifted their heads like swimmers. Here and there and far away the cotton wagons, of hand-painted green, stood up to their wheel tops in the white and were loaded with white, like cloud wagons. All along, the Negroes would lift up and smile glaringly and pump their arms. They knew Miss Dabny was going to step off Saturday with Mr. Troy.

This might have been the greatest plantation novel of all had Welty had the courage of Margaret Mitchell's convictions, or the courage to expose the lies and fears that lay beneath them. Instead, she spread fairy dust over the cotton fields and refused to confront, or even explore, any of her pretty characters. She couldn't afford to. As a result, "Delta Wedding" is a tour de force of distraction—food, flowers, dotty old aunts—its focus always shifting around a nonexistent core. Perhaps this justly reflects how such a family lived with itself, but the artistic price that Welty paid for so successfully mirroring its self-deception is heavy. Her characters remain blurred, as in a faded photograph—closed off in their delusions, small and indistinct against the beauties of the land that cannot save them or this book from being, finally, empty and unfulfilled.

In the fall of 1946, Welty used her

"Delta" money to follow Robinson to San Francisco, where he had moved after leaving the Army. She spent five months living alone in cheap single rooms, writing stories and nursing Robinson through colds and depressions, then returned to Jackson in the spring. It was during those months that she completed what she has called the most personally meaningful of all her stories, the complex and deeply moving "June Recital," which became the centerpiece of her next collection, "The Golden Apples." A story about artistic aspiration and personal failure, it tells of an old-maid piano teacher who is slowly driven insane; rumored to have murdered her mother, she is led away after trying to burn down their house.

Welty went to San Francisco again that fall, and then back to Jackson. It was New York the next year—she tried to break into writing for the theatre—and then back to Jackson. In 1949, she travelled to Europe, apparently to meet up with Robinson in Florence. And it was there that Robinson fell in love with the man he was to live with for the rest of his life. Welty told him how happy she was for him, and their friendship suffered no great break. Nor was there any apparent effect upon her work, except that when she wrote of herself in fiction again it was not as an old maid but as a widow.

Alone, permanently now, she travelled more than ever, but the effect on her writing was, conversely, a deeper drawing-in. Welty's stories from the fifties—set in New Orleans or in Ireland or on a boat to Naples—seem thin and conventionalized, the experience never quite convincingly firsthand. Yet her treatment of the contemporary South comes to seem even less credible, not by reason of defects in her talents but by her design. This is not a new development. "The Ponder Heart," a 1954 novella, is essentially "The Robber Bridegroom" rewritten, a heavily whimsical fable about another purely innocent Southern man—Uncle Daniel Ponder, so rich and amiably crazy that he gives all his possessions away. The major differences are that Welty's literary model is no longer the Brothers Grimm or Yeats but something akin to the folksy humbug of Will Rogers, and that this time she had a great success. The slender volume became an alternate selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and fulfilled Welty's theatrical dream by opening in a stage adaptation on Broadway in 1956. *Life* magazine ran a feature on the giddy new comedy in the same issue that it ran Faulkner's "A Letter to the North," a directive warning the country to go slow in forcing changes on the South in the increasingly volatile matter of civil rights. ("They don't mean go slow," Thurgood Marshall is reported to have said. "They mean don't go.") Eight years after President Truman proposed the integration of the military (still uncompleted by 1956), and less than two years after Brown v. Board of Education overruled "separate but equal," Welty's determined avoidance of social reality assumed a social significance of its own. "The Ponder Heart" turned her into Mississippi's favorite daughter—the besieged white public was only too happy to see itself in her adorable eccentrics—which proved to be excellent timing, because she now came home for good.

SHE hadn't any choice. Her mother had undergone cataract surgery in 1955, and she did not recover well, becoming frailer and ever more demanding until her death, in 1966. Both of Welty's brothers died in the same span of time. Only many years later, in "One Writer's Beginnings," did Welty acknowledge the heartfelt sacrifice and wild frustration of this period, her frantic scribblings at the steering wheel as she raced between hospitals. She began a novel about a big family reunion but hadn't the concentration to carry it through. After a lifetime of refusing to consider teaching—a profession too closely associated either with her mother or with old maids—such work became a solace. She began to lecture on writing whenever she was asked, and she was asked increasingly often. ("I'm so well behaved" is how she modestly explained her new campus popularity. "I'm always on time, and I don't get drunk or hole up in a motel with my lover.")

These college lectures and the needling questions Welty had begun to be asked about her lack of involvement in civil rights gave rise to her best-known essays—"Place in Fiction" (1956) and "Must the Novelist Crusade?" (1965)—defending her position as a nonpolitical

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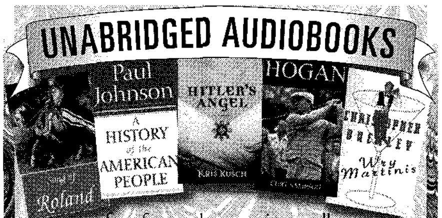

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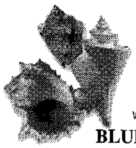
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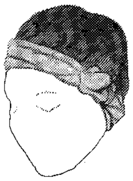
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writer in highly political times. There is not much to dispute in her argument for the writer's need to be well rooted in his or her native soil (citations: Proust, Jane Austen) or in her point about the damaging results that political crusading may have on fiction (standard whipping boy: John Steinbeck). But Welty comes very close to expressing disdain for any exercise of judgment, or any expression of anger ("even to deplore, yelling is out of place"), and this demand for restraint does seem tied, unavoidably, to her very political perception that "we in the South are a hated people these days." Better than to judge or to get angry, she claims, is to do as she does—to affirm, to write only with love. A noble dictum, but it is the opposite of what Welty actually did in the one extraordinary work that she produced in all these years—a story that turns her rationalizations upside down and shows the kind of forceful, honest writer she could still be.

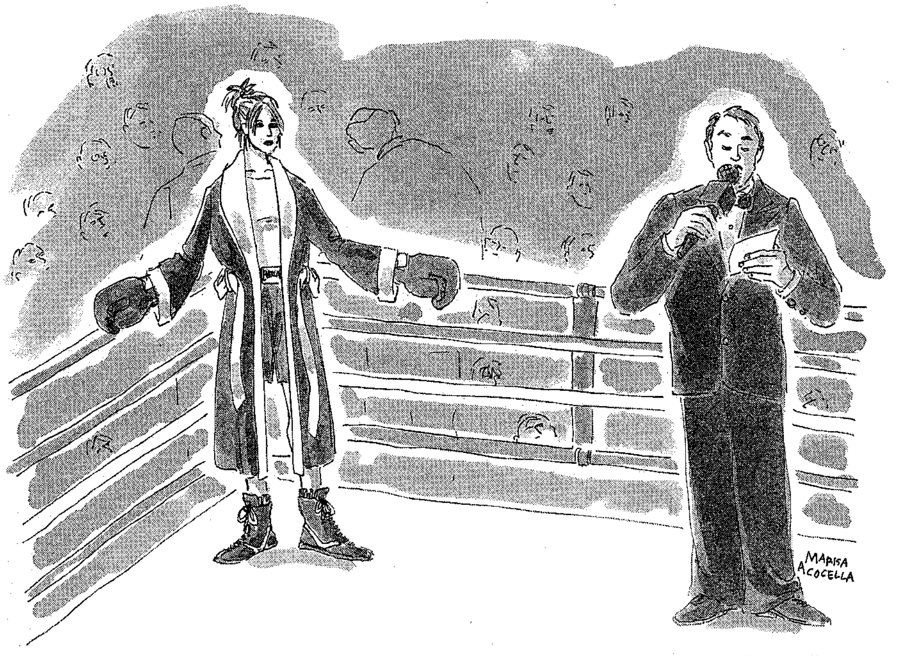
On the night of June 11, 1963, Medgar Evers was shot in Jackson. Upon hearing the news, Welty went to her desk and wrote a story in a single sitting. Perhaps this was just the kind of rapid-fire response that prompted her best work—such as "Powerhouse"—or else the act of opening her eyes to the world again was what made the difference. But the story she wrote—"Where Is the Voice Coming From?"—is ablaze with the reconnection of words and purpose, as though the current of power in her early stories had never been diverted. A dramatic monologue, it takes place entirely within the mind of Evers's killer—a fictional figure, for the real one had not yet been arrested—and is foul and vicious and pathetic and full of lacerating hate. The story begins with a couple watching television:

> I says to my wife, "You can reach and turn it off. You don't have to set and look at a black nigger face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear. It's still a free country."
>
> I reckon that's how I give myself the idea.

The story appeared in this magazine two weeks after it was written. Details had to be altered for legal reasons, because some of the author's inventions were so close to the facts discovered in the few days after the killer was caught. But Welty had mistaken one significant detail about the killer, as she was nearly bound to have done: his class. Although the white-trash voice of the piece was brilliantly sustained and chilling, the killer was from one of the best Delta families. Yet, as Welty had to point out herself, in defense of her intuition and her story's validity, the basic psychology of a murderous bigot is the same in every class:

> There was one way left, for me to be ahead of you and stay ahead of you, by Dad, and I just taken it. Now I'm alive and you ain't. We ain't never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead.

It was only when she explained, in later interviews, how she'd come to write



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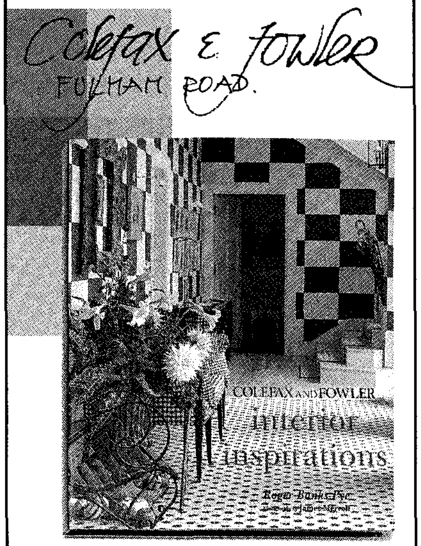

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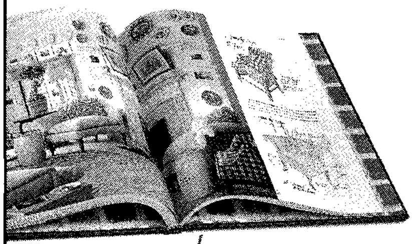

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this story that she referred to "that world of hate that I felt I had grown up with." (It took three trials and thirty years to convict Evers's actual killer.) Elsewhere, rather like Uncle Daniel Ponder, she increasingly insisted that she had been "brought up in a world of love." Her loyalty to a past and now often despised way of life was naturally intensified by a loyalty to the family she'd lost, but also, it seems, by her need to justify her years of sacrifice to them. (Compare Faulkner on the subject of the artist's sacrifice: "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies.") Welty produced just two short stories in the eleven years between her mother's surgery and her mother's death. Then she released a small torrent of work, all on the subject of the gloriously intractable bonds of family.

"THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER" (1972) and "One Writer's Beginnings" (1984)—an autobiographical novel and a romanticized memoir—offer dual tributes to Welty's parents' perfect marriage. "Between some two people," she writes in the latter, "every word is beautiful." Their relationship seems to have loomed ever larger in Welty's mental life, and these books suggest wistfully overlapping images of the author: as a child standing alone and listening intently outside a closed circle of adult love, and as an old woman, even more alone, still straining after the voices in an awful silence. Welty's family portrait does not omit the difficulties of having been her mother's daughter, but only hints at the continual interference, the guilt, and what must have been a battering anger in the later years. Yet these two slender, plainly written books are as morally simplified as her earlier fables: the element of fantasy remains in the nearly absolute division between evil and good. Perhaps for this reason, these have been among Welty's most popular works, and have contributed to her growing aura as a kind of Eleanor Roosevelt of literature.

Less tightly controlled, less readable, and far more interesting is Welty's big novel, "Losing Battles"—the "family reunion" book that was brewing all those difficult years and was finally published in 1970. A sprawling, unwieldy work, it

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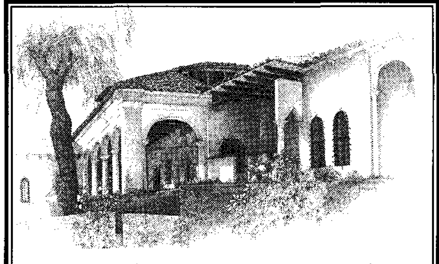

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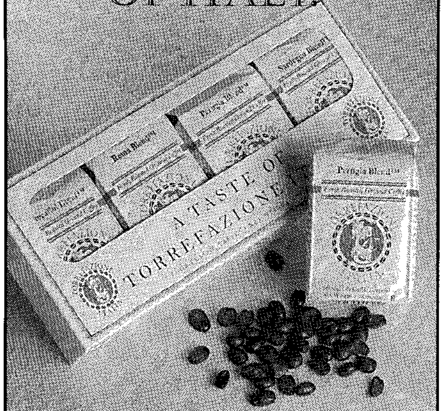

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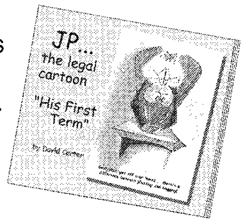

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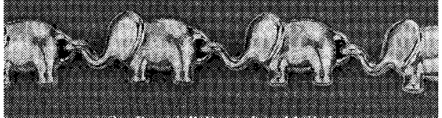

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seems to have been written in a state of war between the author and her subject—or, more precisely, between the author and what she tries to feel about her subject. Welty spoke of "Losing Battles" as "a novel of admiration for the human being who can cope with any condition, even ignorance, and keep a courage, a joy of life," but all that affirmation is hard to find in this disturbing, imbalanced book. It takes hundreds of pages of rustic farce to bring the members of a poor white hill-country clan together, and it is only then that we learn, in a few asides, their various secrets. One-handed, religion-spouting Uncle Nathan, for example, once murdered a man and "let 'em hang a sawmill nigger for it"; he cut the hand off himself, as part of his penance. The revelation is quietly stunning, and seems to matter, yet it is given no weight and immediately disappears.

Altogether, this book seems a puzzle in which the most important pieces have been hidden, even from the author. And it is these very pieces, however baffling or obscure, that possess a terrifying power. There is a three-page scene involving fruit that is more sexually bizarre than anything since Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": the women of the clan surround an overproud young wife and knock her down, pin her flat, then ram slabs of watermelon into her face—"the red hulk shoved down into her face, as big as a man's clayed shoe, swarming with seeds, warm with rain-thin juice"—and down her throat. "Ribbons of juice crawled on her neck and circled it, as hands robbed of sex spread her jaws open." Their purpose—"Come on, sisters, help feed her! Let's cram it down her little red lane!"—is to get her to admit that she shares their name, and so is just like them, one of the family:

> "Why, you're just in the bosom of your own family," somebody's voice cried softly as if in condolence. Melon and fingers together went into her mouth. "Just swallow," said the voice. "*Everybody's* got *something* they could cry about."

The scene is so violent that a reader is not sure that the victim will survive. As it turns out, her dress is barely soiled, and all is forgotten.

Forgotten, too, are the lessons of Welty's last and finest old-maid schoolteacher, the woman who loses the battles of the title and dies having tried and failed to bring enlightenment to Mississippi. The tale of her death is horrible: old and feeble, she is tied to her bed by one of the family aunts and, worse, her pencil and paper are taken away. That is when she really wants to die. For a short while she scribbles with a wet finger on her bedsheet, but then the sheet is ripped off to make her stop. Somehow she manages a final letter, which is sneaked out to one of her former students, a judge now nearly an old man himself; it contains an urgent warning about the one thing she has failed to take into account:

> Watch out for innocence. Could *you* be tempted by it and conspire with the ignorant and the lawless and the foolish and even the wicked, to *hold your tongue*?

Buried in the core of this misshapen, determinedly bumptious comedy is an American tragedy of true distinction. But Welty was not in the business of writing tragedies, and if she spent much of her life ignoring her heroine's warning, that life was permitted to run a far happier course.

In a public tribute to Welty in 1969, the great Faulkner champion Malcolm Cowley spoke in praise of her already famous qualities: "Gentle, unruffled, unassuming, kind, she is an unusual figure. . . . 'Isn't she nice!' other writers always say of her. Her writing is nice, too . . . fastidious, scrupulous, marked by delicate discrimination." And this is the image of Welty that has prevailed, firmly shutting out the old, indelicate discriminations, the fooly-racky-sacky deliriums, the world of hate she split wide open and exposed with expert hands. But, clearly, this change has been her choice. A born outsider in a stifling, hypocritical, yet tantalizingly charming society, Welty discovered that she could write her way into acceptance; year by year, book by book, she came to be wholly embraced. Who would not find such acceptance irresistible? Who would not be glad and grateful? In terms of her art, however, it was a hard bargain. These new volumes make it all too clear how an intrepid explorer turned into a perfect lady—a nearly Petrified Woman—with eyes averted and mouth set in a smile, who from time to time let out a bloodcurdling cry, as though she, too, could not forget what had been lost. ♦

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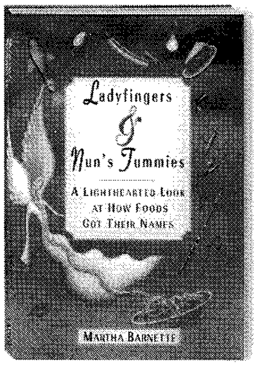
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READING AHEAD

New writers keep the fictional faith.

BY DAPHNE MERKIN

EUGÈNE MIHAESCO

IT may be because I've gotten older or the culture has become too crowded, but these days when a new novel comes my way I often find myself thinking of something the critic Anatole Broyard once said to me. It was one of those casual conversations—I was talking to him on the phone—that take on a retrospective importance, like a snapshot that captures more than it set out to do. Broyard, who reviewed books for the *Times* for many years, was telling me about a first novel he had read and was about to knock; I'd read it, too, and was urging him to be kinder—not merely out of some sense of abstract generosity but also because I was working on a novel of my own, and shuddered to think what the Broyards of the world might have in store for me. Among the people I had met who were invested in the state of contemporary literature—professors, writers, and critics—he was the one for whom reading seemed to mean the most. Indeed, while most volumes of literary criticism have titles of great and indefinite subtlety, Broyard had called a collection of his reviews "Aroused by Books"—about as bald a statement of the seductive potential of this cerebral experience as you could hope to find.

While he and I argued about the novel at hand, Broyard suddenly cut in with a question: "Is this novel necessary?" It struck me as the sort of challenge that was waiting in the wings to be posed; indeed, one might argue that the question was ahead of its time, presaging the changes—Oprah, the bookstore chains, and the Internet—that would transform the landscape of reading, though they were then only gleams in the distance. Broyard was brazenly contesting the axiomatic claim on our attention which novels were supposed to have. "We exist," they call out to us from shelves, windows, advertisements, and reviews, "ergo read us!" I remember I laughed and said that such an absolutist criterion would exclude vast stacks of fiction. But when I got off the phone I felt as though the parameters of the discourse had shifted under my feet: all of postmodernist malaise yawned before me, and I knew I would never be able to go back to my luxurious youthful perspective—wherein characters waited obligingly for me to wrap myself inside them, like a cashmere throw. I thought of a line from Mallarmé that remained with me after much of my college French had fled: "The flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books." I loved the lyrical declarativeness of it, and the link between erotic and literary disappointment. But I didn't really believe it, maybe because I suspected you couldn't call an end to a love affair just like that.

LATELY, the predicament of fiction—its ongoing state of peril—has made its way into the writing itself. Where sensibility once reigned supreme, we now find sensibility plus marketing savvy. Even serious authors understand that readers are no longer the captive creatures they once were, breathless for the sexual and psychological gossip that fiction provided. These days, we have to be lured away from the Starr report, and there is always a Starr report in one form or another. The much discussed memoir explosion is a response to this barrage of stranger-than-fiction information, of course, but so is a novel like John Burnham Schwartz's "Reservation Road" (Knopf; $24). I trust I will be understood as giving the book its due if I say that underneath its fine-pored prose beats a heart of pure pulp. Schwartz's sweetly modest first novel, "Bicycle Days," a coming-of-age tale set in Tokyo, carried a sense that a young man with some writing skill had gone out and written what he knew. It did not prepare me for anything about "Reservation Road," from its churning engine of plot to its audacious inhabiting of three different characters' minds. It feels as if Schwartz had been given a makeover—as though he'd gone offstage between one novel and the next, only to return as a more polished, and less natural, version of himself.

The novel revolves around a hit-and-run accident in which Josh Learner, a ten-year-old boy, is killed. (Popular fiction has long relied on catastrophic devices for momentum, but their use in ostensibly literary novels is a relatively recent wrinkle.) The consequences of the incident are narrated from the first-person viewpoints of the parents of the child, Ethan and Grace, and of Dwight Arno, the driver of the car. Ethan Learner, a professor of literature at a small New England college, is lost in the kind of sorrow whose main manifestation is rage: "I hope it happens to you," he shouts at the officer on the case, who has failed to find the perpetrator. Grace, who worked as a landscape gardener before the accident, spends much of the book in bed. She cries constantly, as does everyone else, including Emma, the Learners' eight-year-old daughter; Schwartz's world is a literal vale of tears. The person who appears to be least troubled by Josh's death is the man who caused it. Dwight, whose ten-year-old son, Sam, was with him on the July night when he struck Josh on a curving Connecticut road, has been ducking misfortune for so long that he's on automatic denial. "Whether you're innocent or guilty doesn't matter," he says. "It's the sound of your name in a place where you expected no one to know it that's enough to tip you over the edge." In the aftermath of an ugly divorce, including a violent scene with his wife in which he accidentally broke Sam's jaw, he feels on probation in his own life, and reacts to Josh's death defensively rather than compassionately.

"Reservation Road" is what used to be called a page-turner: you keep reading to find out what will happen next. Will Grace pull herself together? Will Dwight give himself up? Will Ethan come to terms with the disaster? Will justice be served—or, short of that, vengeance? The novel is tightly wound, like a set of rolled-up blueprints that the author spreads out before us, page by page: everything seems to fit in somewhere in the grand narrative scheme, and no chance encounter goes to waste. I didn't necessarily believe that these people would act as they do, but I'm not sure that matters much, for in between their cunningly strategized entrances and exits there are sensitive descriptions to distract one: of the sky ("Above the trees the sky sat like an enormous bruise"); of Grace's garden ("Her garden dying like a country gone to war"); of the scar on Sam's face ("You made for the left earlobe and dropped down an inch, followed the jawline with care and . . . there it was, pale as a thread of sun"). This tremulous prose is not to my taste, but I accept that it strikes many people as the real thing. I am also willing to overlook the fact that the three main characters express the same level and texture of insight: Ethan sounds like Dwight, who sounds like Grace, and I frequently found myself checking back to see whose chapter I was reading. They're all awash in the same attenuated, tragic thoughts, with little accounting for differences in class, gender, or plain old experience. What does bother me, however, is the weight of Schwartz's intentions, which seem grand and inauthentic. If he had set out to write an entertainment (as Graham Greene used to call his lighter novels), "Reservation Road" would feel a bit calculated but satisfactory. As it is, I think the author means to comment sagely on the human condition. His novel is filled with suffering, but very little of it appears to be arrived at by means other than artifice. It's odd to think of darkness being added as a commercial touch, but it's less odd when you think of the audience the book is meant for. It reads as though someone had put together a composite of the ideal upper-middle-class reader of fiction—half impatient to get back to "60 Minutes" and half guilty about not having got to that new novel everyone keeps mentioning. It's the perfect quick fix for the overscheduled but well-intentioned: profundity without sweat.

THE pleasures of reading Helen Schulman's spryly inventive novel "The Revisionist" (Crown; $23) are very real but, as far as salability is concerned, less obvious. The book is about David Hershleder, a thirty-nine-year-old neurologist who takes on his own demons only after confronting the spectre of Holocaust revisionism, and it exists (or seems to exist, which is all one can ask for) without anxiety about readership, commercial imperatives, or the vagaries of the current moment. It is propelled by considerations of historical identity—particularly Jewish self-loathing—but also by the simpler impulse to articulate those things which people who don't write novels often notice and file away without finding the words for. There is the way, for instance, that adults read to young children: "Then he read to her out of some rhymey book, truly amazed at the schoolteacher lilt that slid into his voice. He even rested the book on his extended forearm, turning the pages from the bottom corner in a poor imitation of his own beloved kindergarten instructor, Miss Antonucci, so that he and his daughter—her blond locks radiating like a sunflower on her pillow—could both see the pictures at the same time." And the eccentric, precise habits we all have: "Hershleder pushed some crumbs together with his right forefinger. When there was a pile, he wet his thumb with his tongue. Then he pressed his thumb to the crumbs. They stuck to his fingerprint. He raised the lace to his mouth and sucked them off." But, above all, Schulman's novel provides what is for me the addictive gratification of fiction: the ability to transport one into someone else's head.

The head in question is fairly tortured, although not in the dramatized style of Schwartz's characters; here the torture is the general insufficiency of life to come up to our "flirty hope," while we, in turn, keep expecting a shot at redemption. Hershleder is a native of Queens, born "during the most repressed and boring decade of the century" to an adoring survivor mother and an absentee American father; he has kept his mother company through her lonely marriage and her post-divorce pursuit of Holocaust studies, but believes that his failure to be with her at a crucial moment has led to her suicide. As the novel opens, the roof has caved in on Hershleder's neat Larchmont existence: his shiksa wife, Itty, has thrown him out and has taken up with a young, ponytailed jogger. Bewildered and angry, Hershleder embarks on a circuitous voyage to self-acceptance, which includes an affair with a college girlfriend he has continued to carry a torch for; a trip to Los Angeles, where he is shot with an animal-tranquillizer gun; and a visit in Paris with an anti-Semitic chemist who has written a thousand-page study documenting the existence of the death camps he formerly denied.

Schulman, who has published a short-story collection as well as a previous novel, has the kind of voice—curvy and thoughtful and wholly credible—that rises over the brassy contemporary din and makes you listen up. She's adept at capturing the discontent that runs under the surface of ordinary life, and is often glancingly funny. Admittedly, "The Revisionist" is packed with improbable coincidences, and exhibits a slightly Cubist approach to the technically tedious but necessary points of plot that move a story forward: it took me several pages to figure out that Hershleder was not just fantasizing about having been replaced in his own home by another man. No matter: she has taken a somewhat tired subject, the sort of material that was fresh when Saul Bellow happened upon it—i.e., the occupational hazards of being brainy, horny, and Jewish—and given it an original, glistening spin.

So perhaps the flesh can be made happy, and there are books to be discovered after all. I am standing in Grand Central Station, uncharacteristically early for lunch with a friend, and I keep checking the clock, hoping she won't show up until I finish the story I'm reading. As people walk by me, I notice them in that automatic body-space sort of way, but I might as well be alone in time. I have been lulled into a state of receptivity that is the sensation I read for—that exhilarating feeling of being along on someone else's ride, of not knowing where it's going but trusting it. The story I am reading is called "Variations on Grief"; it's by Meghan Daum, a writer who is new to me, and it's from a collection called "The KGB Bar Reader" (William Morrow; $14). It's brutally quick, the way this happens, this falling in love with a writer's style. If it hasn't happened by the fourth or fifth sentence, it probably won't happen at all. Daum's story, which is about the refusal to mourn the death of a friend, hooked me by the second line: "Four years ago, I decided to create an ironic occurrence, rather than a tragedy, a cautionary tale, rather than the wretched injustice it really was." Hmm, I thought, this is a writer worth suspending my routines for; let my American Express bill go unpaid one more day. The really endearing part of Daum's story—the thing that makes you drop your readerly defenses and succumb—is that the friend in question was a somewhat vacuous guy, who shopped for Ralph Lauren sheets and "had only eaten in stylish places with ceiling fans and aspiring models at the bar." He's not, that is, the type who would have hustled down to East Fourth Street to hear the narrator reading her ambivalent elegy to him at the KGB Bar—a smoky place crammed with youthful literary enthusiasts of the

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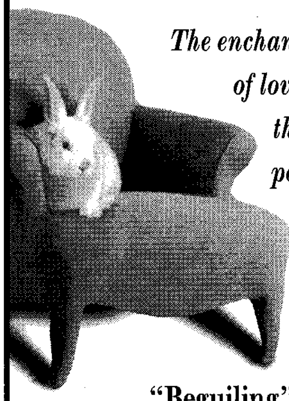

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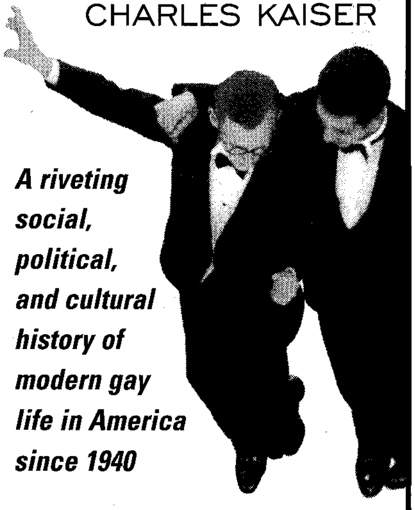

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sort Broyard, were he still with us, would be happily surprised to see.

The "Reader," which was edited by Ken Foster, a graduate of Columbia's writing program, has been culled from the first four years of readings at KGB. In his short introduction, Foster makes the kind of high-jumping claim that people who put together anthologies feel compelled to make: "That, contrary to what we've been taught, there may be just one universal story. Someone loses something." (Well, maybe, but one could just as well argue that the universal story is that someone longs for something he never had.) His last sentence, however, caught me up short, because it seemed both so obvious and so original: "And that the best writers reveal something about themselves that a smarter person would choose to hide."

Many of the stories in the "Reader," which includes relatively established voices (Michael Cunningham, Jennifer Egan, Rick Moody) as well as less familiar ones, shamelessly reveal aspects of the writers that are blushworthy, or at least not what you'd feature about yourself on a first date. The narrator in Cunningham's "Mister Brother" reflects on his "lonely, plump, and petulant" youth as a cravenly admiring younger brother, providing a worshipful audience for his older brother's Saturday-night pre-date ministrations: "Mister Brother smiles into the mirror. You watch as he plucks a stray eyebrow hair from the bridge of his nose. Later, as the future starts springing its surprises and you find yourself acquainted with a drag queen or two, you will note that they do not extend to their toilet quite the level of ecstatic care practiced by Mister Brother before the medicine cabinet mirror." Part of the thrill of coming upon a story like Elissa Schappell's "Novice Bitch," for instance, is realizing that there are other oddballs walking around out there, who look every bit as normal as you do, and that some of them know how to write. Schappell's story is narrated by a high-school girl, the daughter of a divorced mother who trains show dogs; she has had a series of abortions, while her friends "are still caught up in making out, and dry humping, playing the power game of stopping guys before things go too far." And she adds, "Well, too far is where I live." Again, it's not a matter of how appealing or unappealing this character is: it's the inverted charm of her confidences that makes you want to linger, all judgment suspended. Considering how unique our experience is, it's curious how much agreement exists—how much, that is, someone else's perceptions can seem borrowed from your own arsenal, as though you had been sharing your interior life without being aware of it.

The best of these stories are too distinctive to suggest any trends, I'm happy to say, although one can't help noticing the matter-of-fact acceptance of drugs, the graphic intrusion of sexual desire, and the effect of the movies in the kicker-like, "cut to" last lines many of them have. They send you in search of other work by these writers—I sought out Schulman's novel after reading her in "KGB"—and, indeed, in search of voices farther out on the frontier. The wittily titled "Virgin Fiction" (Weisbach/Morrow; $14) is a collection of twenty writers under thirty-five who are being published for the first time, in response to an announcement for a contest that appeared in the on-line magazine *Salon*. Such alternative anthologies—including "Between C & D: New Writing from the Lower East Side Fiction Magazine," and, more recently, a Scribner volume of stories from writing workshops—are a good antidote to the somewhat clubby selections that appear in the annual "O. Henry" and "Best American Short Stories" anthologies. The "Virgin" collection, albeit uneven (I would suggest excluding entries that use the lowercase, e.e.cummings-esque "i"), showcases some promising unknowns who are startlingly of their moment. The chilled-out, post-Gen-X mother and wife in Amy Boaz's "Waiting for the John Cheever" could be the rebellious daughter of an Ann Beattie character—all that wistfulness and lingering sixties protest having given way to an ironic appropriation of the straight life. This narrator's deliberate unintensity about everything, from older men who show interest in her ("He is forty-three—they are all forty-three, and bewildered") to her irritation with her toddler ("I'm going to hit her. . . . It's her cry I need to hear"), is itself a stylistic revelation. Similarly, Jane, the narrator of Tamar Love's "The Comfort of Paper Trees," who is in a masochistic relationship with a bisexual, might be the nineties' version of Maria, the anti-heroine of Joan Didion's "Play It as It Lays." Nothing much has changed for a certain kind of needy, passive woman lost in L.A., except that the author takes Jane's desperation entirely in stride. All that's left of the cultivated alienation that was the signature of that sixties and seventies writing is a sense of implicit disenchantment; it's a sine qua non that everyone has grown up too quickly and seen too much.

NOTWITHSTANDING the talk about fiction being trumped by the memoir, I found the stories in both anthologies more inspired—more urgent, that is—than the nonfiction that appears in yet another recent anthology, entitled "Personals: Dreams and Nightmares from the Lives of Twenty Young Writers" (Houghton Mifflin; $13), which was edited by the fiction writer Thomas Beller. There are exceptions, particularly Rachel Wetzsteon's "The Black Cape and the Crying Baby," and a brief reminiscence by Anatole's daughter, Bliss Broyard. But something about the clutter of many of these pieces—their unmediated autobiographical data—made me itchy, as though I were trapped on a train next to a very talky person. "I should fictionalize it more," says the narrator in "Demonology," Rick Moody's story in "KGB." "I should consider the responsibilities of characterization. . . . I should make the events orderly, I should wait and write about it later, I should wait until I'm not angry, I shouldn't clutter a narrative with fragments." I second the motion.

Maybe it's time we stopped bemoaning the lack of excitement in fiction, as though nothing had appeared to make our pulse race since Robert Coover and Harold Brodkey appeared twenty years ago in Ted Solotaroff's *New American Review*. The writers are out there, should anyone be looking. And, unlike Coover et al., they're less concerned with the limitations of language and of fictional narrative than with the task of insuring fiction's place in a largely indifferent culture—one that is too preoccupied with reality to pay attention to the vivid truths of invention. The fact that they keep writing, in spite of their shaky status, is laudable, and I hope they stick with it until the wheel turns again. Their fiction may not be strictly necessary, but in an age of twenty-four-hour news channels it's a luxury we need. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Foreign Student, by Susan Choi (HarperFlamingo; $23). This auspicious début novel, set in the nineteen-fifties, is epic in its harrowing accounts of war and intimate in its charged descriptions of the unlikely love affair at its center. Chang Ahn, a Korean scholarship student, comes to the University of the South, in Sewanee, after narrowly surviving the Korean offensive; there he meets the brilliant, impetuous Katherine Monroe, who has returned to her childhood summer home to escape life as a New Orleans belle. Alternating between their respective pasts and their tentative present, the novel elucidates, in supple prose, the immense range of the lovers' differences while revealing the surprising affinities between them.

Ghost Town, by Robert Coover (Holt; $24). Trust Robert Coover to undermine trust. In his new novel's skewering of the Western, characters switch jobs, scars, and identities—even the buildings change places each time the nameless protagonist walks down Main. But genre isn't the only target of Coover's perversity: the goings on are often hilariously obscene, and perhaps truer to the old West than what we imagine. "Ghost Town" is both warped and scintillating, a cross between "No Exit" and "The Canterbury Tales." But what of our assumptions, those cherished visions of the American frontier? Snake eyes, Coover seems to say: the only good assumption is a dead assumption.

Tomcat in Love, by Tim O'Brien (Broadway; $26). Thomas H. Chippering, occupying the Rolvaag Chair in Modern American Lexicology at the University of Minnesota, has lost his wife to an oily Tampa tycoon. The loquacious Abe Lincoln look-alike and Vietnam hero can't imagine why, but it may have something to do with her discovery of the Torah-size ledger he keeps for recording the pertinent details (including city of origin) of every woman he dallies with. Vulnerable to "well-sculpted enrollees" and obsessed with language, betrayal, and revenge, Tom is a baby-boomer Humbert Humbert, unencumbered by gravitas.

Rules of the Wild, by Francesca Marciano (Pantheon; $23). Esmé, the Italian-born narrator of this first novel, has come to Nairobi to forget the death of her poet father, but instead she finds herself caught between two men—Adam, a quiet bush guide who offers her a comforting vision of Africa's wilderness, and Hunter Reed, a stringer for the London *Independent*, who plunges her into an Africa of poverty and violence. Marciano skillfully delineates an expatriate life of "survival consumerism," in which urban frivolities (cappuccino, cocaine) live in the shadow of genocide.

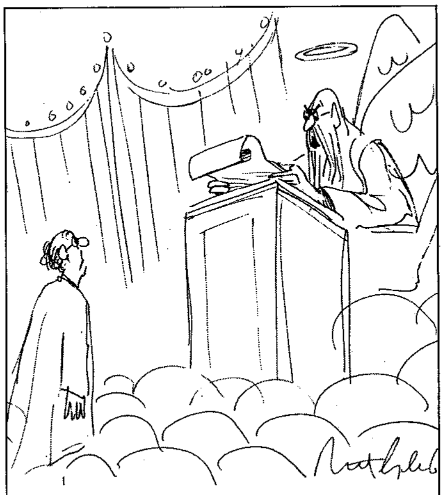
Blindness, by José Saramago, translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero (Harcourt Brace; $22). A man waiting in his car for a red light to turn green is the first of an entire city's population—with one exception—to be blinded by a "milky sea" of dazzling whiteness. The inexplicably disabled victims grope and stumble their way through nightmarish landscapes—first an asylum where those initially afflicted are quarantined, and then the chaotic, squalid streets to which they return. Saramago's surreal allegory explores the ability of the human spirit to prevail in even the most absurdly unjust of conditions, yet he reinvents this familiar struggle with the stylistic eccentricity of a master.

Sweet Water, by Kathryn Kramer (Knopf; $24). In the basement of the dilapidated Vermont spa that Greta and Ned Dene have converted to a summer home, a dowser discovers a literary treasure trove from the nineteenth century—fifty years of letters from O., a Henry James manqué, to Lucinda Dearborn, the spa's former owner—revealing a secret relationship that casts the Denes' troubled marriage into sharp relief. Kramer's third novel, with a deceptively gothic surface over its core of wistful melancholy, carefully illuminates "how one might spend a lifetime believing oneself to mean something to another that one did not."

Eucalyptus, by Murray Bail (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $23). In this contemporary Australian fairy tale, a widower named Holland acquires a sprawling property in New South Wales and plants it with hundreds of varieties of eucalyptus (Scribbly Gum, Darwin Woollybutt, Rose-of-the-West); when it is time for his daughter, Ellen, to wed, he offers her hand to the suitor who can name each specimen on his estate. In the meantime, Ellen encounters a handsome stranger under a coolabah who courts her with stories that prove to be less random than they appear. The novel's categorizations and mysteries become a playful inquiry into the nature of storytelling, with an unpredictable conclusion.

Two Cities, by John Edgar Wideman (Houghton Mifflin; $24). Kassima, her husband and sons dead, meets Robert Jones in her native Pittsburgh, sleeps with him, and spends much of the rest of the book doing her best to avoid him: this is a cautious love story. The narrative's anchor is Kassima's elderly tenant, who wanders about Pittsburgh and Philadelphia with a camera, making the invisible visible. Wideman, similarly, is a writer who shows you things you would never have seen without him; his prose at once bears the weight of a brutal, complex legacy and exults in a sort of weightlessness.

Mistler's Exit, by Louis Begley (Knopf; $22). After learning that he has only six months to live, Thomas Mistler leaves his doctor's office feeling strangely buoyant. Instead of breaking the news to family and associates, he flies to Venice, where he takes stock—literally (selling his business in a deal marked by subterfuge and rectitude), sexually (with two chance affairs), and in solitary reflection. Begley has once again created an antihero whose venality can seem simultaneously mythic and comic, as in the final scene, when Mistler happily bargains for a Venetian wherry ("shiny black like a coffin"), knowing that, in this deal, "he would not cheat."



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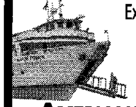


MUSICAL EVENTS

OFF THE TRACKS

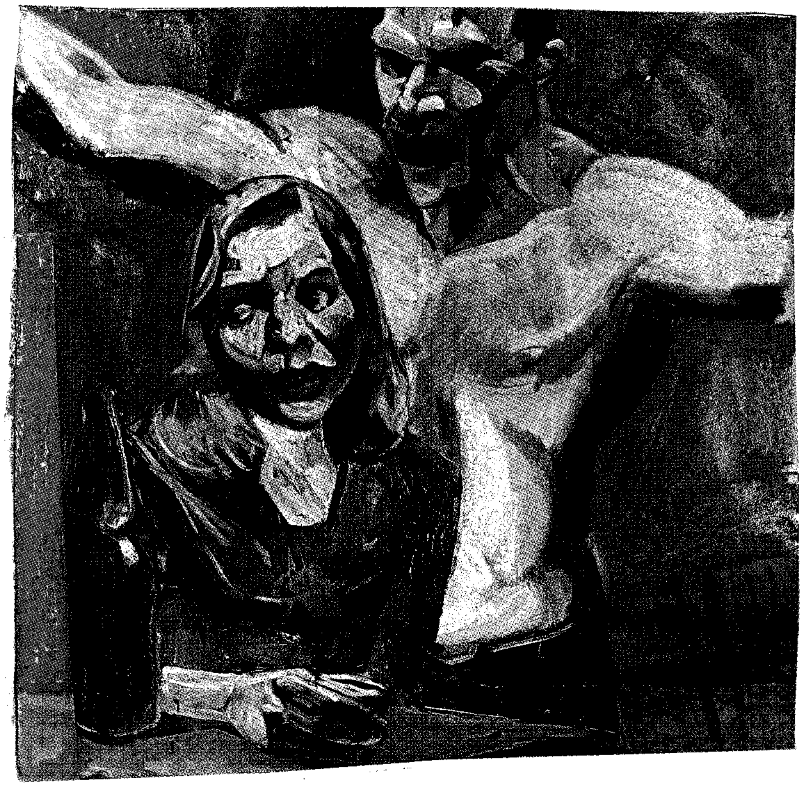
Previn stumbles; Schoenberg soars.

BY ALEX ROSS

André Previn's "A Streetcar Named Desire," which had its world première at the San Francisco Opera on September 19th, begins with subterranean tones on the tuba and dissonances in the remainder of the orchestra. It's an arresting, menacing sound—first a chord of six simultaneous pitches, then a seven-note chord, and, later, sinister clusters of eight and nine notes. There's more than a hint of Berg's "Wozzeck" and "Lulu" in the pileup of intervals. The density of the harmony puts us on notice: this "Streetcar" will not be a lightweight, jazzy score, such as Previn used to toss off for Hollywood films, but a deep-thinking music drama, with undercurrents of Central European modernism. It's not what one expected from Previn. It's also not what one expected in a sultry drama of New Orleans.

Previn has had a strange career as a classical composer: much of the time, he has been brilliant at everything *but.* He was born in 1929 in Berlin; after immigrating to America with his family, in 1939, he rebelled in the direction of jazz and Hollywood, and began orchestrating scores for M-G-M while still in his teens. In the sixties, he took up international conducting. His penchant for loud clothes and his marriage to Mia Farrow made him something of a pop-culture figure. In recent years, he has turned more of his energies toward composition. He has written several graceful song cycles and some sensuously melancholy chamber music. In his latest works, there is a sweet, sad, restless voice that is unlike any on the current compositional scene. One of his most winning moves is a quick segue from borderline-corny cocktail-lounge music to darker, more acerbic material.

Is this familiar but hard-to-place figure finally coming into his own? "Streetcar" is a major test—by far the largest work Previn has attempted. The formidable reputation of Tennessee Williams's play is itself an obstacle. So many of its lines have become catchphrases—"Death is expensive," "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers," and the famous male shriek of "Stella!"—that the addition of music risks an unintentional humorous effect. (Previn wisely has Stanley Kowalski yell the name and not sing it.) Philip Littell, the librettist, has ingeniously trimmed and telescoped the play without sacrificing any major scenes: we're given the full moralistic brutishness of Kowalski, the selfless evasions of his wife, Stella, all the lurid memories of Stella's wounded sister Blanche DuBois.



Renée Fleming as Blanche DuBois, and Rodney Gilfry as Stanley Kowalski: An ambitious, new opera that is as disoriented as its heroine.

ANDREA VENTURA

Still, the opera runs three and a half hours, and the pace slows as it goes. Previn has immersed himself in the play and come up with some striking responses, but he has not mastered it in musical terms.

Perhaps a Tennessee Williams opera just isn't possible: it's often been observed that his plays are already quasi-operatic, even on the page. But Previn, I think, faced a deeper problem. Opera, whether traditional or modern, leans heavily on repetition: the audience needs to recognize motifs as they recur and to be able to link characters or situations to them. But this particular composer is naturally skittish, reluctant to dwell on one idea. In the first scene, for example, we hear, in quick succession, a snarling motif for trumpets, a short yearning phrase on the cello, and a lovely dirgelike tune for English horn. These themes all seem to illustrate aspects of Blanche DuBois's decadence and disorientation. But none of them becomes a familiar signpost. We don't get a distinct musical picture of each character.

The orchestration is oddly opaque. In his chamber music, Previn often surrounds a serious, searching string line with impressionistic arpeggios in thirds or tartly augmented triads, the sorts of tricks a lounge pianist uses to fill out a familiar tune. But when he translates that bluesy, happy-sad vocabulary into orchestral textures it seems to lose its crystalline, playful air. It begins to resemble, in fact, the rumbling symphonic jazz that Alex North composed for the famous "Streetcar" film. That was an innovative score for its time, but over the years it has become synonymous with a certain kind of trite noirishness—music to play underneath a private-eye voice-over. Previn has said that he didn't watch the movie while working on the opera, but a memory of North's music seems to have stayed with him—witness those beefed-up minor chords, that manfully keening trumpet line. They say, in musical terms, "It was a dark and stormy night."

There are other allusions, reminiscences, near-quotations in the piece. Opera composers have every right to lean on their predecessors, but they have to be careful about sending mixed dramatic signals. For example, in the interlude that follows Kowalski's climactic assault on Blanche, there is a strong suggestion of the violent military scherzo of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. Shortly afterward, in Blanche's hallucinatory final aria, we hear dollops of Strauss's "Rosenkavalier." I can understand why Previn made these references: Kowalski is a Second World War veteran, while Blanche has lost herself in imaginary Old World refinement. But it's disorienting, to say the least, to be jerked from the Soviet Union to waltz-age Vienna.

The musical shortcomings of "Streetcar" cannot be blamed on the cast. The role of Blanche was written for Renée Fleming, who seized the opportunity to shake up her wholesome image. Everyone knows that she has a luminous, aristocratic soprano voice, but not everyone would have expected her to wallow in madness, lust, and despair. In truth, she didn't, but she is plainly growing as an actress. Elizabeth Futral turned in a brilliant, scene-stealing performance as Stella: her clarion voice cut through the bustling orchestra more easily than Fleming's, and her enunciation was clearer. (Fleming laid on the Southern accent a bit thick.) Rodney Gilfry, as Kowalski, had the unenviable task of filling Brando's shoes; his noble, nonviolent baritone sounded miscast at first, but he proved an excellent physical performer, gliding sexily around his female targets and giving the character an interesting air of calculation and reserve. Anthony Dean Griffey, an imposing tenor who's had considerable success as Peter Grimes, gave unexpected comic energy to the straight-arrow role of Mitch. Previn himself conducted, getting vigorous, sometimes overloud playing from the orchestra.

The production, by Colin Graham, did not depart radically from Elia Kazan's original vision. The sets, by Michael Yeargan, had emblematic New Orleans railings and just-so shabby furnishings. If nothing else, the handsome production and the handsome cast together showed how thoroughly American opera has brought itself up to date. It's hard to complain that the art is out of touch with contemporary American culture when a baritone can peel off his T-shirt and excite a murmur of appreciation from the crowd.

WHO would have thought that a weekend with Arnold Schoenberg would be more fun than a night in San Francisco? I'm still jazzed by a series of Schoenberg concerts at Merkin Hall, in New York, earlier this month. One night, Robert Craft led a group of first-rate pickup musicians in the First Chamber Symphony; then, Craft, Milton Babbitt, James Levine, Charles Wuorinen, and Osvaldo Golijov trooped onstage for an uproarious panel discussion, which the indestructible Babbitt playfully dominated. (The godfather of serialism professed ignorance of "the whole twelve-tone thing" and claimed—he is eighty-two years old—to have met one of Schoenberg's teachers.) The next day, Rolf Schulte, Toby Appel, and Fred Sherry played the beautifully incomprehensible String Trio, and Mary Nessinger and Christopher Oldfather gave a humid rendition of "Das Buch der Hängenden Gärten." Another wacky panel followed—one in which Lawrence Schoenberg tried to prove that his father was no dogmatic authoritarian by showing slides of the great man with rabbits and puppies. There was a certain amount of delusion in the air—everyone agreed that the Variations for Orchestra were unperformable, yet no one was willing to blame the composer. Nonetheless, the blazing energy of the Chamber Symphony performance seemed to make all discussions of Schoenberg's famously difficult music beside the point. ♦

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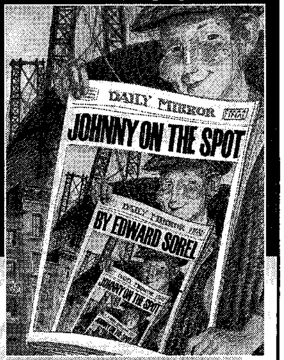

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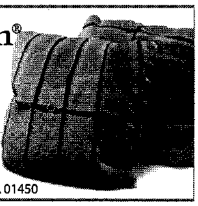

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ANSWERS TO 8X10 CRYPTIC NO. 60

ACROSS

1 P(ROT)EST
8 AC(R)E
9 OGRES (hidden)
10 SE(A + FAR)ER
12 TAR + SI (*is* rev.)
13 CO + CO. + A
15 US(HER)ING
17 MINE + O
18 ON + U.S.
19 STY + LIST

DOWN

1 PROSE + CUTOR (*court* anag.)
2 R + AGE
3 THE + FT.
4 S(CURRY)ING
5 TRU(E)ST
6 BEA(RING O + U)T
7 B(RANCH) OUT
11 BOS(UN)S
14 AR(I)EL (*Lear* anag.)
16 NETS (anag.)

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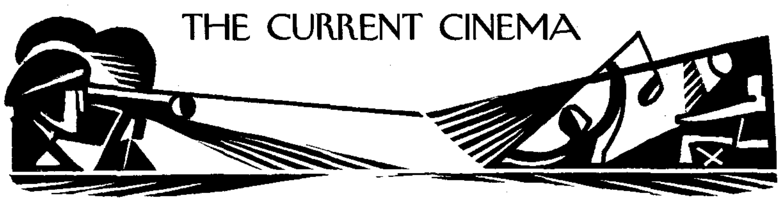


THE CURRENT CINEMA

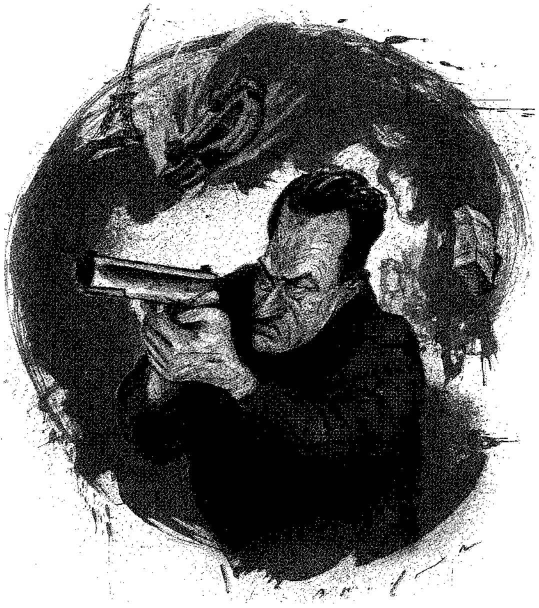
ON THE ROAD

John Frankenheimer takes the samurai to the Riviera.

BY ANTHONY LANE

As Robert De Niro stood up on the front seat of the speeding black Audi and poked the upper half of his body through the sunroof, the better to rest the rocket-launcher on his shoulder and aim it at the car in front, I arrived at the mature conclusion that "Ronin" was, all things considered, a rather enjoyable film. The lead vehicle duly explodes, flips over, and carries on travelling for a while; we are on the Côte d'Azur, along whose glamorously lethal curves Grace Kelly took the petrified Cary Grant for a spin in "To Catch a Thief," and by those standards the occasional rocket attack feels like a cautious contribution to road safety. Rumor had it that "Ronin" contained one of the best car chases in recent years, but that is not strictly true: "Ronin" contains at least *three* of the best car chases in recent years. The most fruitful approach to John Frankenheimer's movie is, perhaps, to treat it as one long car chase, with occasional pit stops for the refuelling of character and plot.

Our story begins in Paris, in a Montmartre café; somnolent viewers will be shaken awake by the chewy and unusual sound of Robert De Niro speaking French. He plays Sam, an American who has left the C.I.A. and now hawks his services elsewhere. With him in the café is a bunch of other freelance operatives: Spence (Sean Bean), who claims to be a British ex-soldier; Vincent (Jean Reno), a Frenchman so French that he still smokes those ozone-busting yellow cigarettes; Gregor (Stellan Skarsgård), the computer buff who, as in most Skarsgård performances, resembles a bank manager with submerged homicidal tendencies; and Larry (Skipp Sudduth), who likes to drive. None of them have met before; they have been brought together by Deirdre (Natascha McElhone), a young Irishwoman who wants them to steal a suitcase. Now, this is extremely good news: we have grown so weary of the inflated narrative device—the interplanetary wrecking ball that threatens the future of Earth, the leering villain who must sate his bottomless psychic needs—that McGuffin lovers everywhere will rise to applaud a film that depends on nothing more burdensome than the recovery of lost luggage.



Robert De Niro as an ex-C.I.A. agent tries to recover a lost suitcase, in "Ronin."

STEVE BRODNER

Needless to say, the team itself takes the suitcase very seriously indeed, and not just because the financial rewards are high. When Sam and his colleagues sit in hotel rooms and plot their next move, "Ronin" takes on a quiet and purposeful air—not quite solemn, but never wholly free of the educated suspicion that, in so tense an enterprise,

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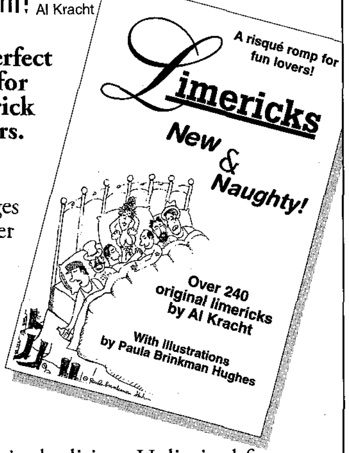

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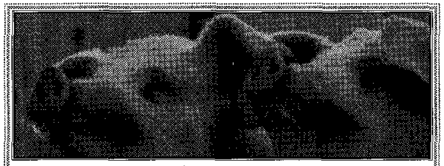

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there will always be someone whose thoughts slide toward treason. Frankenheimer is still fond of the deep-focus shots that worked so well for him in "The Manchurian Candidate," where faces loomed close to the camera, and he has finally found another tale to suit that bulging paranoia. "When there is any doubt, there's no doubt. That's the first thing they teach you," Sam says to Vincent. "Who taught you?" asks Vincent. "I forget. That's the second thing they teach you," Sam replies. Such doubts creep in near the start of the movie, in an extended sequence by the side of the Seine. The men have come under cover of darkness to buy weapons, yet even this shopping expedition turns into a miniature cold war. You could accuse Frankenheimer of overkill here, and of delaying the take-off of his plot; but he is equally concerned, I think, to thicken the mood like mist, and to strengthen the ticking sense that something explosive is about to happen.

There is no better place for that squirm of unease than the quays of Paris, and "Ronin" nudged me back in the direction of gloomy delights like "Rififi" and Jacques Becker's "Touchez Pas au Grisbi," in which Jean Gabin, like De Niro, was knotted in double crosses. It is certainly a vast relief to watch an American director taking command of territory and textures that he knows. After the grind of international thrillers like "Mission: Impossible," "The Saint," and "The Peacemaker," all of which dropped in on locations because they looked pretty or sounded grim, "Ronin" feels properly grounded and travel-stained; apart from a few uninterested aerial shots of Nice and Arles (and a disastrous final voice-over about Ireland, which should be rewritten and re-recorded before the film comes out on the other side of the Atlantic), Frankenheimer cleaves to the relaxing dramatic principle that the best way to infiltrate the spirit of a place is to have your characters go about their business there—visiting a garage, say, or sipping a cup of coffee. Frankenheimer speaks French, and has often worked in the country before; remember the tetchy Popeye Doyle in "French Connection II" and his lung-bursting run along the docks of Marseilles.

On the debit side, there was "Grand Prix," in which Frankenheimer fell for the modish notion—very 1966—that motor-racing was viewed to best advantage on a split screen. Thankfully, that flashiness has died away, and when the motors of "Ronin" race they are filmed from a terrifying point of view just below the front fender; occasionally, the camera faces the other way and eats up a hundred yards of cobbles in two or three seconds. At one point, the participants accelerate down into a tunnel under the Seine; the last person to do that was Henri Paul, and you have to admire Frankenheimer for holding his nerve and sticking to his guns, or his gas pedal, while the Diana memorial industry was in full cry. Most people in "Ronin" get to show off their driving skills: Natascha McElhone jumps lanes and heads straight for the oncoming traffic, which may be the only sensible means of beating the Paris rush hour, while De Niro, with a shuddering face, locks and stiffens his arms to grip the wheel, slammed back into his seat as if by the sheer G-force of being Robert De Niro.

"RONIN" is full of stars, yet it is not a starry picture. For a thriller, it feels oddly democratic; De Niro's soft chestnut jacket is almost the only concession to color in a movie of dour monochrome, and nobody, even when the plot untwists at the end, seems to have the moral edge on anyone else. Maybe this is because Sam and his men are ronin—a Japanese term for former samurai, masterless and wandering. Some moviegoers will have heard the word before: "I am Kambei Shimada. I am only a ronin. I am not a samurai and I have no followers. . . . I've got nothing out of fighting. I'm alone in the world." Thus spoke the gently smiling sage in Kurosawa's "The Seven Samurai," shortly before he beat the shit out of the bandits, and "Ronin" can be read as an act of homage to the Japanese director, who died recently. Like him, Frankenheimer uses his movie to break down some of that loneliness, and to nurture at least the temporary illusion of companionship. "I never walk into a place I can't walk out of," says De Niro, closely echoing the even more inward character he played in "Heat" ("Do not have anything in your life you are not willing to walk out on in thirty seconds flat"); yet he kisses Natascha McElhone to put off a passing police car, and offers no objection—he's not an idiot—when she considers for a moment and then turns her face to him for more. We never see them kiss again, let alone make love, and in most films that would count as a loose end; in the world of the ronin, however, a single smooch is all you can afford.

There *are* loose ends in "Ronin": after the central shootout on the Riviera, the action switches confusingly back to Paris, and the all-important substitution of—wait for it—a second suitcase is performed so swiftly that you barely realize what's happened. But these are faults of urgency, not of laziness, and much of the script has a good laconic crunch to it: "You ever kill anybody?" "I once hurt somebody's feelings." The movie was written by J. D. Zeik and Richard Weisz; it came as no surprise to learn that the latter was a pseudonym for David Mamet, polisher extraordinaire, and I wonder whether he or Frankenheimer was behind the sadistic, can-you-watch scene in which Sam, without anesthetic, supervises an operation on his own punctured torso. "Ronin" is undoubtedly cruel at times: it makes no bones about the fact that bodies—whether those of the principals or of innocent bystanders, nicked by fenders and crossfire—are likely to be crushed in the fray. Yet even the grating shock of that violence appears weirdly honest beside the huge, harmless mayhem that we have come to expect from our blockbusters. In the sombre air of "Ronin," a car crash is a car crash, not some funny fireball of special effects patched on at Industrial Light & Magic long after the scene was filmed. It's as if the nineteen-eighties had never existed: John Frankenheimer has made a fine return to form, not to mention the best Audi commercial of all time, but, more important, he makes you believe, for a couple of hours, that Simpson and Bruckheimer were nothing but a bad dream. ♦

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8x10 CRYPTIC

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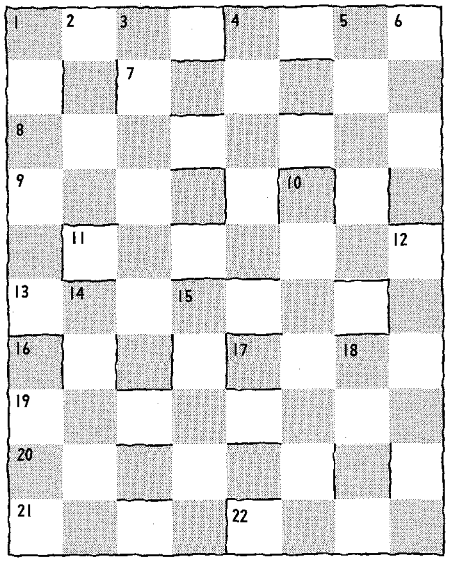

ACROSS

1 In Aesop, a story ended (4)
4 Nabokov novel with male gardener? (4)
7 Dependable essay about American President's end (6)
8 Kid grabbing Swiss girl in Russian novel (3,5)
9 The lady's hug is for the story's main man (4)
11 Playwright includes love advice (7)
13 Author of "Nine Stories" dropping a pitcher (7)
17 Shot most of play (4)
19 Hear a Mayan author pens an Indian epic (8)
20 English spar with wit (6)
21 Places in "Tess" altered (4)
22 Alabama author's dregs (4)

DOWN

1 Passages containing Ovid's first deep feeling (6)
2 Long article on revolutionary (4)
3 Hormone editors abused (7)
4 Poet in a university study (5)
5 Reconcile French style in English poet Housman (5)
6 Fictitious tale in my author's heart (4)
10 Except for the first letter, able to read word again (7)
12 "A Couple of Rounds" (guy's book) (6)
14 After the début, delight with "Rent" (5)
15 Approaches end of narration with listeners (5)
16 "Iliad" god strips topless (4)
18 Italian poet losing the first bet (4)

• •

The solution to puzzle No. 60 appears on page 112. For a free copy of "The New Yorker's Guide to Solving Cryptic Crosswords," please send your fax number or a stamped, self-addressed envelope to "Solvers' Guide," The New Yorker, 20 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036. For an electronic version, send an E-mail to puzzleguide@newyorker.com.

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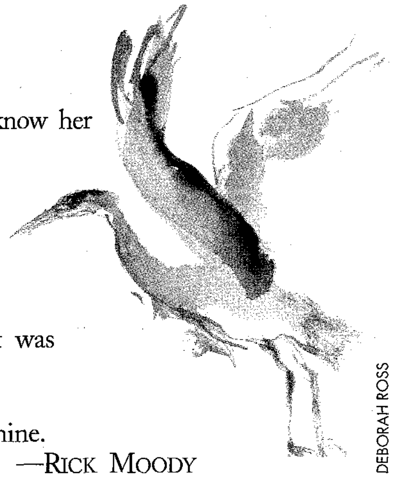
We do not know precisely the rate of growth of the young
In immature birds the neck is reddish brown
Too soon marr'd are those so early made
A lot of hugging, holding hands sometimes. He always
used to push the hair out of my face
Both briskly preen their feathers
I'm an insecure person
Dynamic gliding is used in particular by large seabirds
All Americans are entitled to enjoy a private family life.

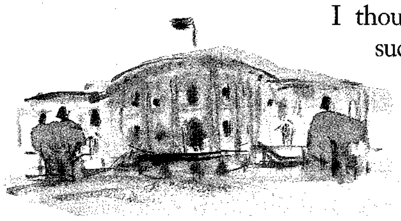
With love's light wings did I o'er perch these walls
We were both aware of the volume and sometimes
I bit my hand—so that I wouldn't make any noise
The constant use of the beak inevitably causes wear and tear
please be my friend
The true thing is shading into the imagined thing, all right?
Many of the 30 or so gifts reflected his interests in history, antiques, cigars, and frogs.

This is a matter of sex between consenting adults
For never was a story of more woe
The difference in quality between different territories
makes it more convenient for a female to choose an
already paired male
He needed to acknowledge that he *helped fuck up my life*
Harming him is the last thing in the world I want to do.

Classification of birds:
pheasant, grouse, gull, loon, heron, coot, stork
You want me out of your life,
I guess the signs have been made clear for a while
We met, we woo'd and made exchange of vow
Flight is undulating and irregular
I may be subject to the upbraidings of all
who are now witnesses of the present solemn ceremony
And what I assume you shall assume.



The girl floats around in her nightgown
C'mon, it's me
I intend to reclaim my family life for my family
She had complained that he was making no effort to get to know her
She wanted to have sexual intercourse with him at least once
Call me but love and I'll be new baptized
She told me I looked fat in the dress.



The nest is made in a hole, in rocks, or in a tree, often near water
What the meaning of the word "is" is
I thought I fell in love with this person that I really felt was
such a good person
I'm sorry to bother you with this
Every day can't be sunshine.

—RICK MOODY

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